

One *Billy Hargrove/OC* by dragonchallenge

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action/Adventure, Angst, Drama, F/M, Possession, Romance, Supernatural Elements

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove's Mother, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Original Female Character(s), Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2020-05-26

Updated: 2021-04-10

Packaged: 2022-04-01 01:55:41

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 7

Words: 112,468

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Rachel Winters has always known she was adopted; her parents never tried to hide it. But Rachel has a secret and when it nearly comes out, her family moves from her beloved city in Florida to the small town of Hawkins, Indiana. What Rachel believes is a second chance at a normal life quickly evolves as she discovers a secret government experiment and a young girl with a familiar story. Things are strange enough, but perhaps the simplest part of her new life is also the toughest to understand: a handsome young man named Billy.

1. Chapter One

The new house wasn't quite what I had been expecting. I hadn't seen any pictures of it and I hadn't asked my parents about it. I hadn't wanted anything to do with my new home until we had arrived. Now that day was finally here and there was no way for me to avoid it any longer. This was my new life. This was home now. This was the life that I had stupidly given myself. If only I had been able to control my temper and mind my business, I wouldn't have to start making myself a new life here.

It was too late to try and go back in time. I was just going to have to get used to living here. It started with getting used to my new house. It was a cute house, two stories, which I hadn't been expecting. My home in Florida was probably just as large but it had only been one story. There were very few two-story houses in Florida. This one was large but not quite the size of my old home. It was brick-faced with some white siding while my old home had been coated with light-blue colored stucco.

My eyes caught a small chimney at the left corner of the roof that indicated there was a fireplace inside the home. As upset as I was at having to move, the thought of having a fireplace did almost manage to put a smile on my face. I had always wanted a fireplace, but there had never been any point in having one back in Florida. It was too hot to ever use one. Being in Indiana, I imagined that it would become icy cold in the winter. I let out a deep breath. I had never liked the cold weather.

Even at the end of summer, I could already tell that it would be freezing when the wintertime came. I sighed quietly, pulling my black leather jacket a little closer over my shoulders. I looked at the brick-faced home once again and took a deep breath. My home in Florida was fifteen hours away. There was no way for me to get back home. As my parents had already said, this was our new home, whether we liked it or not. This was my life now, I may as well try and enjoy it.

My dad patted me gently on my right shoulder as I walked past. "Buck up, kiddo. It won't be that bad," he said. We exchanged a long

look. He must have seen the doubt in my eyes as he continued speaking. "Who knows? You may have fun."

I looked at my father and narrowed my gaze. "Fun?" I repeated, motioning down the lifeless and silent street.

"Fun can be found in the most unlikely of places," Dad said.

"Right," I muttered.

Indiana appeared to be many things, but fun didn't seem to be one of them. I hadn't seen one car drive by since we had arrived on the street - and I had sat in my car longer than I would have liked to admit. There was no noise coming from any of the houses. Had I not seen some shadows in the windows, I would have thought the neighborhood was empty. There were no sounds of children laughing or teenagers chattering away; no smells of summer barbeques or splashes from pool parties. I walked up the driveway of our new home and headed toward the front door.

The front door of our new home was painted bright red, unlike the rest of the house, which was mostly a burnt-red brick facing with some white siding on the second floor and around the windows. It looked like the typical all-American home. Now, if only there was a station wagon in front of our new home. My parents would have never dared been caught in something so suburban, though. They hated my car enough, but I had wanted it and they weren't willing to say 'no' to anything I had wanted so badly.

"Go inside, honey," my mother called from her spot at the moving van. "We'll meet you there in a few minutes!"

I walked up to the red door and gently pushed it open. The house was completely different than I was expecting. I had hoped some part of it would resemble my home in Florida; I wanted to see all of the pastel colors and beach themes. The home was instead typical of one someone would see in the Midwest. I was immediately greeted with a grand wooden staircase that led to the second floor. There was no furniture in the house yet, which made it seem far less homey than I hoped it would feel later.

The walls of the home were all painted white, which made it feel like I was going to be living in an asylum. I ran my fingers gently over the wood trim on the walls as I walked through the halls. I went to the right side of the staircase first. There was a formal office with a glass door on it that I knew my father would use to do his work. Behind what would be my dad's new office was a large formal dining room that I knew we would hardly ever use. We only had formal dinners on holidays, otherwise, we would eat in the kitchen.

To the left of the formal dining room was the kitchen. It was slightly smaller than the one we had had in our house in Florida. I knew that my mother would be upset, as she loved to cook. I knew that she would like the small nook in the corner of the kitchen that we would be able to have our casual meals at. I smiled slightly as I walked over to the table and drew back the floral curtain, letting some light into the kitchen. It was already looking a little homier. I ran my hand over the ceramic tile countertops as I slowly walked through the kitchen.

This place was completely different than my Florida home, but as I took a deep breath, I told myself that I could get used to living here. I was positive of that. "Oh, I hope Rachel likes it here," my mother said from the foyer, likely to my father.

"We'll see, Mom. I'm not making a choice our first day here," I called back, letting her know that I could hear her.

My mother was smiling lovingly as she walked around the corner to come into the kitchen with me. "Honey," she chided gently.

"Oh," I muttered dumbly. It had been a long time since I had mistaken what was said out loud for what someone was thinking. My mother was still grinning at me. At least I had done it at home. I ran my hand through my hair as I smiled weakly. "Sorry, I'm a little out of my head. I guess I need to pay a little more attention."

"We're at home now," Mom pointed out, motioning around us. "No need until you're in school."

If only I didn't have to go to school. I couldn't believe that I had to start over in my junior year of high school. "Speaking of school, what

are the chances that you'll consider letting me homeschool myself for the next two years?" I asked.

"Not wonderful," Dad said, joining us in the kitchen. "Honey, you need to be with other kids -"

"Like me?" I asked angrily, arching an eyebrow.

Both my parents' faces flushed. "Your age," my father corrected me.

That was about as close as I could come to be with people like me. "We've seen how well that works," I muttered irritably.

I'd done so well right up until last month. My mother smiled sadly as she walked up to my side and brushed my hair back. "Rachel, sweetheart, I know it's tough but you had a good time at your school in Florida," she argued.

"Right up until I f -"

"Language," Dad interrupted, knowing exactly where I was going with my last comment.

I flushed with embarrassment. My parents put up with a lot from me but they never tolerated my sometimes severe language. "Sorry," I muttered dumbly, walking into the middle of the kitchen and motioning around. "Look, I'm sure this place isn't that bad. It's just going to take some time for me to adjust."

"We know," Mom said. "Go on and explore a little more."

"Okay. Where's my room?" I asked.

"Upstairs to the left. There are two bedrooms you can pick from," Mom explained.

"Thanks," I said.

At least they were willing to let me pick which bedroom I wanted to sleep in. I left my parents in the kitchen as they began telling the movers where to place our belongings. I walked along the back of the house on the other side. I passed a large pantry at the edge of the

kitchen and a large family room that was set a few steps into the ground. There was enough room in the far corner of the family room that would be able to house the new television my dad had wanted for years to watch football on.

There was a laundry room on the other side of the family room and I let out a breath of relief. I knew that my parents would have me helping with laundry and I was glad to see that it wasn't down in a basement. I had always found basements a little creepy. There was a small powder room off of the laundry room and a two-car garage that I had to pass to make it back to the grand staircase. I glanced up at the chandelier that hung above me and let out another deep breath. It was a beautiful home but it didn't feel like mine.

Holding my head as high as I could, I walked upstairs, dragging my feet along the wooden floor. I went to the right first to see what was on that side of the house. It was a large master suite that would be my parents' bedroom. I closed the door to their bedroom and turned back to the left to look at the two bedrooms that my parents had offered me. I walked into the bedroom furthest down the hall first. It was a little larger than my bedroom back in Florida, but this one had a bathroom.

It looked nice but I wanted to see what the other one looked like first. It was very similar to the first as it had a bathroom attached as well but there was one fewer window and it was a little smaller. Not to mention that it was closer to my parents' bedroom. I shook my head. Not that one. So, I went back to the first bedroom and headed toward the window. I didn't just want the bedroom because it was larger and further away from my parents, but also because there was a trellis just outside the window.

Judging by the appearance of the trellis, I knew that it was strong enough that I would be able to climb up and down it. I wasn't much for sneaking out in the middle of the night, but I had done it a few times before. It was also nice to have the option to get out if I wanted to and my parents didn't want me to go. It would be nice to get the chance to go on a nighttime walk or maybe a party I wanted to attend. Or, maybe even a date if all went well with the boys here. I wasn't sure what I would use it for, but I knew for a fact that this was my bedroom.

Once I had settled on my bedroom, the first box of my things arrived in the hallway. I walked away from the window and thanked the movers, taking the box and pulling it into my room. I opened the flaps and pulled out my boombox, smiling at the sight of it. I had always loved music. I turned on Under Pressure by David Bowie, blaring the music loudly enough to be heard through the house. I grinned at what I was sure was two very annoyed looks on my parents' faces downstairs.

Dancing around my new room, I began pulling out the rest of my things from the box. I wasn't the best packer in the world and that was evidenced by the way my things were jammed into the box. Underneath the boombox were posters of some of my favorite bands including Metallica, Bon Jovi, Def Leppard, AC/DC/ and Motley Crue. I had all of their albums somewhere in my boxes - something I was sure my parents were praying would get lost in the move. They could never stand all the racket I made.

My parents loved music but had never been fond of my taste in it. I didn't care, I loved it. It allowed me to block out everything else in my mind as long as I could keep the volume loud. It was one of the reasons my parents had never outwardly said anything about my musical taste. I began unfolding my posters and hanging them around the room, pressing them into the same relative spots that they would have hung in back in Florida. It was a little piece of home.

It may have been a little silly, but it made me feel like this was my home and not someplace that I had been forced into. I let out another deep breath as I continued flitting around the room, flinging my things into the relative locations they were supposed to be in. The movers came in and out as I unpacked, bringing in my bedframe, mattress, bedside tables, desk, and dressers. After I had been unpacking for nearly an hour, I opened the window near the trellis to let in some fresh air but ended up being surprised by the slight chill in the breeze.

Mid-August had always been blazing hot in my hometown. It had been nearly a hundred degrees when we had left Florida the day before. It was currently in the low eighties in Indiana but the breeze was still a little chilly. It was harder than I had initially expected to be so far away from the life I'd set up for myself in Florida. I missed

the sun and warmth on my skin. I figured that it would only be so long before the tan began to fade from my skin. I stood at the window for a moment, determined to not let my mood affect me.

Indiana was my home now. I'd known that for weeks. I now just had to find a way to live with the change of scenery. I could find new friends to hang out with here. I had at least two years to figure out how to navigate life at a new high school. I could enjoy it. I would have time to get to know my classmates before we all left for college and the working world. It was two years here. I could manage two years, and who knew? Maybe when I was ready to go to college, I could look into one back in Florida. I could finally go home.

Most of the next few years were spent decorating my room as box after box was dropped in by the movers. As my room began to take shape - closely reflecting the one I had left behind only thirty-six hours prior - I began to feel a little more comfortable in Hawkins. It may not have been the place I would have picked to move, but I supposed there was some kind of charm in it. The new house was nice, at least. I hung a floor-length mirror over the back of the door and kneeled as I began sticking pictures into the frame.

Many of the pictures were of myself and my parents, but there were also a few of the friends I had left behind in Florida. Many of the pictures were taken at the beach I had lived near. It was always one of my favorite places to be. I would certainly miss the beach in land-locked Indiana. I supposed I could go to the local pool or maybe a lake if I could find one. My father had told me that there were a few lakes near Hawkins, but I hadn't seen a single one as we'd driven into the small town.

The first genuine smile appeared on my face as I began going through the pictures of my friends; all of our silly parties and holidays spent together. There were some funny ones of trips to theme parks and ones taken of us half-asleep during late nights spent studying. I smiled at the picture on the top of the pile of my best friend, Casey Walker, and placed it near the top of the mirror. I had promised Casey when I'd seen her just before we'd left that I would call her as soon as I was settled in Hawkins.

I placed the rest of the pictures around the frame of the mirror, trying

to stagger the ones of friends and family. There was one special picture that I placed at the center of the top of the frame. It was a picture of the day my parents had adopted me back in 1970 when I was only three-years-old. I remembered nothing from my life before being adopted, but I knew how grateful I had always been for them. They were the reason I had grown up with a real family and not in an orphanage, alone, and uncared for.

My parents were some of the loveliest people I had ever met and they were the people I cared about most in the world. Unlike many other adopted kids, I was lucky. I looked enough like my parents that I could easily pass for being their biological daughter. My mother was short with dark blonde hair while my father was tall with deep brown hair. I was short with light blonde hair. We all shared a nearly identical tan from our time spent in the Florida sun. My only real difference from my parents was my eyes.

My father had deep brown eyes while my mother also had brown eyes; though hers were a little lighter in color. While two brown-eyed parents could have a blue-eyed child, it was rare. I didn't share the brown eyes that my parents had. My eyes were blue. They weren't just a regular blue, though. They were so light that they had been mistaken for being white in the sun. It used to freak people out when I was younger but my friends had come to love them by the time I was a teenager.

When my parents had first adopted me they had been afraid that my eyes meant I had some kind of disease or potentially even cataracts. They had sought out medical advice from multiple doctors to see if the color was any indication that I would go blind with age, but every doctor they had seen had claimed that my eyesight was just fine. There wasn't even a need for me to wear reading glasses. They had told my parents to enjoy the fact that I had different colored eyes.

My mother and father had never tried to hide the fact that I was adopted. They had told me it for as long as I could remember and had always promised to answer any questions I'd had about my birth parents. Back in Florida, everyone had known. My parents had informed everyone that they would be gone a few days to adopt a daughter. My parents had left on a two-day trip to pick me up from

the orphanage I had lived in and come back with the three-year-old me and had immediately enrolled me in pre-school.

My fellow students had been told from the time we were all little that I was adopted. The occasional cruel jeer had been thrown my way when I was a child, but I had always known how to take care of myself and over time, my parentage had become accepted. No one had cared that I was adopted. Now that I was new here and didn't know anyone, I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to tell people that I was adopted. I didn't want to face the questions that were sure to be asked and I didn't want to open myself up to even more ridicule than I was sure to get as the new kid.

There wasn't much I could tell them about my life when I was a child, after all. I had no memories of my life before I had been adopted. I couldn't remember where I had been raised or who I had been raised with. I didn't have the slightest idea of who my parents were or why they had decided to give me up. I had never been interested in knowing what my early life had been like. When I was old enough to understand, my parents had told me that my biological parents were unknown and I'd never had any further interest in getting to know who they were.

When I was very young I had briefly wanted to know about my parents, but that desire had passed almost immediately. I had no reason to want to know what they were like. My birth parents hadn't wanted me and that was enough to tell me what I needed to know about them. I didn't even know where my parents had adopted me from. My parents had once told me that they would answer any questions that I'd had about my birth family, but I had quickly told them that I didn't want to know anything. I knew that answer had pleased them.

The only thing my adoptive parents had told me about their lives before me, was that they had tried for years to have a baby of their own. That was all I had wanted to know - I had always been curious why I didn't have siblings. My parents had eventually realized that they were getting too old to have a baby through natural methods and if they wanted to have one while they were still young enough to enjoy raising a child, they would have to adopt one. That was where their search had begun.

As my parents had said, they had initially searched for a newborn. When I'd asked why they hadn't settled with a newborn, they had explained that they had fallen in love with my developing personality and had instead happily adopted a toddler. It didn't make a ton of sense to me at first, but they had always teased me by saying that they were able to avoid the diaper phase because they'd adopted me in my toddler years. I had decided not to push things even further and leave it at that.

Despite my reasonably strange early childhood, I seemed to have come out of things just fine. I had gotten good grades in my prior school and had always had a plan for my future. I was going to go to a good college and eventually I wanted to become an engineer. I had always had a brain for maths and physics. My parents had told me for as long as I could remember that I could do whatever I wanted as long as I put my mind to it. I wasn't going to let a new school in a new place change my plans. I just had to make it through two years.

I stood from my kneeling spot at the floor-length mirror and looked around my room. Right now, it looked like a tornado had blown through it. I could start organizing things later - once my parents spotted the mess and yelled at me for it. My clothes were scattered all over the floor - which was where they normally were - and my makeup and jewelry were in a pile on my dresser. My posters were hung up along the walls at random intervals and my sheets were half hazardously slung over my bed. I chuckled. It looked like home to me.

It was good enough for now. As long as I kept the door closed, my parents would never know what a wreck my room was. I took out the phone I used in my bedroom and plugged it into the outlet on the wall. I spun the rotary dial around to match Casey's phone number. I had been eager to speak with my best friend since leaving Florida. I just wished we were face-to-face like I was so used to. The phone rang for a few moments before I heard the receiver click with an answer.

"Hello?" Casey's mother answered.

"Hi, Mrs. Walker," I greeted. "It's Rachel."

"Rachel!" Mrs. Walker greeted happily. "It's good to hear your voice, honey."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"How are you liking Indiana so far?" Mrs. Walker asked.

How could I answer her without saying something nasty about the home I'd had almost no chance to get to know? "Well, it's uh, definitely different from Florida," I said awkwardly, making Mrs. Walker laugh. "It's kind of funny. It's things like the leaves changing colors. We never see that in Florida. It's a little odd not seeing any beaches too. It's a small-town vibe out here. It's nice, just not something I'm used to."

"It must be quite the change," Mrs. Walker said.

"Oh, it is," I said, chuckling under my breath. Indiana was unlike any place I had ever been before. "Who knows? It may be kind of fun."

"That's the attitude to have," Mrs. Walker said. "You never know. You could meet some interesting people."

"That's true, but no one can replace you guys," I said truthfully.

The Walkers and the rest of my friends back in Florida meant everything to me. No matter who I met in Indiana, nothing would compare to them. "Make new friends, but keep the old," Mrs. Walker said.

"One is silver and the other's gold," I finished.

"Exactly. I suppose you're not calling to talk to me?" Mrs. Walker teased.

"I always love speaking to you, Mrs. Walker," I said.

"Just teasing you, dear. I'll grab Casey," Mrs. Walker said.

"Thank you."

"Tell your father to enjoy his new job and your mother to keep in

touch," Mrs. Walker said. "We all miss you around here."

"Thanks, Mrs. Walker. I will. Say hi to Mr. Walker for me, please," I said.

"Of course, dear. Hang on a moment."

The phone clicked as Mrs. Walker put me on hold to allow Casey to pick up the phone. I twirled my hair around my finger as I waited. I wished she was close enough that I could hop into my car and head over to her house. Casey used to be a three-minute drive from my house. Now it was well over a fifteen-hour-drive to go visit her. I supposed that I could always head back to Florida for a while next summer, but that was a year away. I was going to have to figure out another way to keep my best friend close for the next ten months.

Suddenly, there was another click on the other end of the line. "Rachel!" Casey yelled.

"Hey, Case," I greeted happily.

"So, tell me everything about Indiana!" Casey chirped.

That was Casey's personality. She could manage to be perky about anything. Even her best friend moving away. "What's to tell?" I asked, chuckling under my breath. "We only got here a few hours ago and I've spent all of my time unpacking since. I've got most of my stuff out now I've just got to put everything away."

Casey laughed. I had always had a messy room, something she'd always mercilessly teased me for. "What's it like there?" Casey asked.

"Weird," I answered honestly. "It's so quiet on the streets. I mean, I saw a few kids riding around on bikes but I haven't seen much other activity." I had briefly seen four young boys riding through the street as I had unpacked. "My parents told me there's a pretty big downtown area. Maybe I'll have to check that out later."

"Is there a mall?" Casey asked.

I snorted with laughter. It figured that a mall would be her main concern. "Typical that your first question would be about a mall," I

told her, making Casey laugh. "Nope. It's all little mom-and-pop shops."

"Gross," Casey replied.

Casey had always liked being able to walk through the malls in the city. She would have died the moment she'd seen the sleepy town of Hawkins. "What the hell am I supposed to do here, Case?" I groaned.

"Get through the next two years and then come home," Casey replied.

I smiled. "It's a deal."

"So, when's the first day of school in Indiana?" Casey asked.

"A week from today."

"You don't sound too excited."

Normally, we loved the first day of school. It was a chance to show off new outfits and catch up on the gossip over the summer. In a town full of people I didn't know, I would have no chance to enjoy the start-of-the-school-year festivities. I would just be the new kid to stare at. "Not really. I mean, I'm already two years into high school. I didn't want to start over halfway through high school. Everyone's already going to have friends and their groups," I said irritably.

"It sucks that your dad got a job there," Casey moaned.

She would miss me as much as I would miss her. It just sucked that I had to pretend that my dad's new job offer was the real reason we had moved. "Yeah, it does," I muttered quietly. "But we'll stay in touch, right?"

"Always," Casey replied immediately. "And, hey, we'll see each other again one day! You'll have to come and visit."

"Definitely. Maybe I can convince my parents to take a road trip back to Florida next summer," I said.

"That'd be great. We all already miss you," Casey said.

"I miss you guys too," I muttered.

It was going to be such a strange next two years without the friends I had become so accustomed to. "Look on the bright side, all the guys in Florida are surfers and beach bums. I mean, they're hot but you have a chance to meet all new ones!" Casey chirped. I laughed under my breath. There was the one positive, I supposed. "Maybe there'll be some hot rocker dude. We've got none of those in Florida."

"Hot and an asshole, I'd bet," I replied.

"Who cares? You're missing the most important part; they would be hot," Casey said.

I laughed again. "Good to know that you've still got your main focus," I told her, making us both laugh. "I don't know. A hot rocker dude in Indiana? Do they even have those in Indiana?"

"They have to have something there!" Casey yelled.

"They don't even have a mall here, Case," I groaned.

"I'll send you something. Just because you have to live in the middle of nowhere doesn't mean you have to look like it," Casey promised.

I chuckled under my breath. "Think I'll stick out like a sore thumb here?" I asked.

"Probably. There weren't even that many rocker chicks in Florida," Casey pointed out. She had always been dressed like she was ready for a trip to the beach. As she'd always said, I consistently looked like I was on my way to a concert. "I doubt there are many in Indiana."

"Maybe it'll give me a good niche," I reasoned.

"The boys there will be putty in your hands in no time," Casey teased, making us both laugh again. We were silent for a moment before she continued. "I can't believe you had to move."

"Me either. Especially here. Hawkins, Indiana. What the hell does someone do in a town like this?" I huffed, motioning out the window even though she couldn't see me. "It doesn't look like there is

anything to do here."

"I'm sure you could find someone to do," Casey said pointedly.

We burst out into a fit of giggles. "Casey!" I yelled.

"Rachel!" Casey mocked.

The two of us had always told each other everything about our boyfriends and interests. Casey was the first person I had told when I had been intimate with my old boyfriend, Jason, for the first time. Casey was the one I had done to when Jason and I had broken up a few months later. Casey was the one I had gone to when I was embarrassed for hooking up with school jerk Brian Blake at a Halloween party last year in an attempt to get over Jason. The two of us had shared everything since we were little.

We'd had a lot of fun over the years. We had always been a package deal. We would always go on double-dates and tease each other for which boys we'd wanted. We were known to be some of the funniest people in my old high school. I couldn't believe that I had to start all over at a new school. I would have to make new friends and learn how to interact with the people in Hawkins. They weren't people I had known most of my life. I just had to remind myself that this was a chance to make new friends and maybe even a new boyfriend.

If there was a chance I found a guy I liked in Hawkins, I knew that Casey was going to be the first person to know. She would kill me if I didn't tell her first. Of course, until I saw what the teenage guys in Hawkins looked like, I was going to be a little doubtful that there was any chance I would meet a guy I liked here. I smiled to myself, twirling the phone cord around in my hand. If there was one positive about this situation, it was that at least I would get to meet some new guys. Who knew? Maybe there would be a few interesting people.

"Come on, there's got to be someone interesting in town," Casey said, breaking me out of my reverie.

"We'll see. I haven't met anyone here yet. I'll keep you updated," I said.

"Oh, and send pictures!" Casey chirped.

"How creepy do you think I am?" I gasped.

"Do I have to remind you of New Year's this year?" Casey shot back.

The two of us immediately dissolved into fits of laughter. New Year had been one of the last big parties I had gone to and we had both quickly found guys we had liked. There had been a polaroid camera that had been passed through the party and too many pictures had been taken - both of the two of us and of our entertaining times with the boys. We had chased our friends around the yard for an hour drunkenly trying to break the camera to make sure those pictures didn't get out. It had taken a while but we'd been successful.

"No!" I yelled, the stupid memory bringing a smile to my face. "No, you don't."

"Rachel!" Dad yelled from downstairs.

"Hang on, Case," I told my friend. "Yeah?"

"Can you go grab the mail?" he asked.

"Sure!" I yelled back. "I've got to go."

"Hey, go explore your new little hick town and call me back in a few days with the scoop," Casey told me. I laughed at her blunt phrasing. "I want to hear all about the hot guys!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'll let you know," I muttered. "Tell me all about your progress with James!"

"Oh, I've got a plan," Casey said.

"We both know your plans never work out," I said, laughing.

"This one will, I promise," Casey said hopefully.

"Sure. Love you, Case," I said.

"Love you too, Rachel," Casey replied.

We hung up our phones and I placed the set back onto my bedside table, rising to my feet. James was one of my former classmates and a longtime crush of Casey's. He had been a year ahead of us and the two of them had been flirting for years. I had made Casey promise to finally make her move once I had left. Without me around, Casey would need something else to entertain herself with. Casey would be able to have James now, but she would also want me to have someone new.

At least I would be able to keep in touch with Casey over the phone. I smiled at the many pictures of the two of us as I left my new bedroom for the first time since I'd walked in. There were already boxes full of pictures and other decorations lining the hallway. My parents were wasting no time trying to make our new house feel like home. I walked out of the hallway, down the stairs, and into the foyer before heading out the front door and down the driveway toward the mailbox.

For the first time since arriving in Indiana, I noticed that some neighbors were around. They were peeking out from their windows to look at the new arrivals. I rolled my eyes. I knew exactly what they were thinking. I knew that they wanted to know what my family was doing here, having come out of the woodwork with no obvious reason to have uprooted our lives to Hawkins, Indiana. I was tempted to turn around and go back inside and forget about the mail when I saw a young girl about my age staring at me.

It appeared that she was also trying to get her family's mail. She was four doors down in a house a little smaller than my new one. I stared at the girl for a moment. She seemed to be the epitome of the perfect high school girl. She had shoulder-length curly mousy-brown hair and wore a buttoned-up collared shirt with a cardigan over it. Her khaki pants were high-waisted and belted tightly. Her deep blue eyes were locked on me with no clear intention to look away. I gave the girl a vague smile. It was how my parents wished I would dress.

The girl's eyes scanned over me as I looked down at my outfit. My blonde hair trailed down my back in gentle waves with small braids thread into the sides of my temples. I was acutely aware of how low-cut my Guns N' Roses t-shirt was, as I had torn multiple holes across the chest after I'd bought it. My leather jacket laid over my shoulders

and my jeans clung to my thighs. My parents hated my sense of style but said nothing, as they knew it was a losing battle. The girl's face didn't express disgust. Instead, she looked curious at my appearance.

I knew that the girl was interested in me. "Hello," I greeted, yelling across the lawns.

"Oh, hi!" the girl greeted, jumping as she realized that I had been looking at her as closely as she had been looking at me. "You must be the new neighbor."

I threw my head back to the moving truck with a slight smile on my face. "Must be," I said.

"I'm Nancy. Nancy Wheeler."

The girl had a bright smile on her face as she crossed the lawns and finally walked up in front of me. I smiled at Nancy and extended my hand to shake hers. "Rachel Winters. Nice to meet you," I told her.

Nancy smiled at me, her gaze moving to the license plate on my car. "You moved from Florida?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah. Born and raised there," I answered.

It wasn't the entire truth, as I knew that wasn't where my parents had adopted me from, but the entire truth wasn't going to come out in our first conversation. "Did you like it in Florida?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, I loved it there," I said happily. "I'm hoping to move back one day."

"Why did you move here?" Nancy asked.

"For a breath of fresh air, I suppose," I replied. We exchanged a small smile. Nancy didn't try to push, clearly sensing that I wasn't willing to talk about my past anymore. "Are you from Hawkins?"

"Yes. I've lived here my entire life," Nancy answered.

"Do you like it here?" I asked her.

Nancy shuffled on her feet for a moment. "Well, it's an okay place to live," she answered. I chuckled at her; Nancy was trying to be nice to her hometown. It was evident that she didn't like it here at all. "The people here are nice and it's got a homey feel to it."

"It does. I've never lived in a place where you can walk downtown and ride your bikes to your friend's houses," I said.

"Really?" Nancy asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Florida's a little spread out. It took at least a five-minute car ride to get anywhere," I said honestly. Casey's house was the closest thing to me. The mall had been twenty minutes away and the school was fifteen minutes away. Most of the people who had lived in my old neighborhood were retirees. I had been the only teenager who had lived there. "There's a real hometown feel to this place."

Nancy smiled at me. "Well, I hope you like it here."

"Thank you, Nancy." I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my pack of cigarettes and lighter, striking it. My parents had tried to get me to quit but had eventually agreed to allow me to smoke as long as it wasn't in the house. I was about to light the cigarette when I saw the look on Nancy's face. "Do you mind?" I asked.

"No, not at all," Nancy said, looking a little embarrassed that I had spotted the repulsion on her face. "It's your property."

"It's a disgusting habit, I know, but I can't seem to kick it," I admitted, lighting the cigarette and taking a long drag.

As I blew the smoke out upward into the air and away from Nancy, I felt my jittering nerves calm slightly. "Are you trying to quit?" Nancy asked curiously.

"I've tried to quit before but it's never worked out. My best friend from back in Florida hated that I smoked," I admitted. Casey had always refused to hang around me while I was smoking. "I don't know, it's always helped calm my nerves."

"Don't be nervous. Hawkins isn't that bad. It's a quiet town and most of the people here are nice," Nancy said.

"Most of the people," I repeated, chuckling as I took another drag.

Nancy laughed. "You know, there are always the typical high school assholes."

My eyebrow arched. I wasn't expecting Nancy to curse the way she had. She struck me as the angelic type. "Oh, yeah. What would the world be without those?" I replied, grinning.

Nancy smiled at me. "Are you still in school?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm going into my junior year at Hawkins High School."

"Oh, me too!" Nancy chirped excitedly.

At least I would know one person when I got to Hawkins High School next Monday. "Nice to know that I won't be surrounded by all strangers on my first day," I told her.

Nancy chuckled. "You know if you want, you're more than welcome to hang around with me."

It was nice to know that Nancy would be willing to hang out around me when I was sure she had her friends she wanted to be with. But if she was willing, I would happily take her up on her offer. I would feel like a loser if I had to sit alone all day. "That'd be nice. I can't be the cliché new-kid-sitting-alone-at-the-lunch-table on my first day," I said.

Nancy smiled again. I figured that she had plenty of acquaintances but not many close friends. "You can always ride with us," Nancy offered. I arched my eyebrow. Who did 'we' mean? "My boyfriend, Steve, he's going to pick me up on Monday morning and we'll drive over together."

Of course. I figured the pretty girl would be dating someone already. I wondered if he was the popular jock like I figured he was. "I appreciate that, but I'll drive myself. I've got a bit of a control issue," I said honestly. I didn't like driving with anyone. Nancy smiled at me again. "I'd be happy to meet you there though."

"Deal," Nancy said.

"How long have you and Steve been together?" I asked curiously.

She didn't get the twinkle in her eyes that most girls did when they were thinking about their boyfriends. "Well, we've kind of been on-and-off over the last year or so. There has been a lot of ups and downs," Nancy said, chuckling awkwardly.

"But you two are okay now?" I asked curiously.

"We're okay now," Nancy confirmed.

Her thoughts told a different story. "You don't look all that excited about him," I reasoned. The two of us stared at each other for a moment. I realized very quickly that just because I knew Nancy wasn't happy with Steve didn't mean that I should say anything about it. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"No, it's okay," Nancy said, waving off my concern that I had gotten a little too familiar with her. "It's kind of nice to have another girl to talk to."

"Yeah, I know how you feel. I had to leave my best friend behind in Florida," I said.

"I get it. I lost my best friend Barb about nine months ago," Nancy replied.

My face instantly lost the tan it normally had. Here I was, acting like it was the end of the world that I had been forced to move away from my best friend when Nancy had lost her best friend. I tried to think for a moment that Nancy meant that Barb had simply moved to another place, but the somber look on her face told me that what I had initially thought was correct. Nancy's best friend had died. Suddenly, I felt like a horrible monster for having been so dramatic about leaving Casey behind.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Nancy," I said dumbly.

Nancy shook her head, the tears building in her tear ducts. "It's - It's okay. I've had a lot of time to get used to it," Nancy said, her tear-

filled voice breaking slightly. "It's just -"

"Hard to say goodbye?" I offered, knowing that she was having a hard time speaking. Nancy nodded. "I get it. God, I feel like a dick now for being upset at having to move away from my best friend."

Nancy smiled at my phrasing. "No, don't feel bad," she said, waving off my concern. "It sucks to lose a best friend, whether it's because you moved away or because something terrible happened to them. You still have every right to be upset about your friend."

"So do you," I said, sensing that Nancy hadn't let people know just how upset she was.

The two of us smiled at each other again. "Is it just you and your parents?" she asked, probably trying to change the subject.

"Yeah. Just the three of us. What about you?" I asked curiously.

Nancy laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, no. It's my parents, my little brother Mike, my little sister Holly, and me."

I smiled. "Big family."

"Have you ever wanted siblings?" Nancy asked.

My face flushed slightly as I began rubbing at my wrist subconsciously. I quickly forced my wrist back down to my side. "Sometimes. I guess it could be fun to have someone to hang out with, but on the other hand, I'm sure we would fight like cats and dogs," I said honestly.

"It's both of those things. I love my brother, but I could kill him sometimes," Nancy said honestly.

We laughed at each other again. "Rachel!" my mother shouted from the front door.

"Coming, Mom!" I yelled to her, turning back to Nancy. "I guess that's my cue. I'll see you around, Nancy. It was nice meeting you."

"You, too, Rachel." I turned away to walk off before being stopped by Nancy's voice. "If you want a chance to get to know Hawkins, I'd be

happy to show you around," Nancy offered. I hummed under my breath. I hadn't considered wandering around town yet. I'd just wanted to get through the rest of high school. Nancy seemed to sense my hesitance to say yes. "There's still a week until school starts."

A lot could happen in a week. Maybe Nancy could at least be a good friend to me while I didn't have Casey. "You know what? That sounds good," I told her honestly.

"How about Thursday? I'll have to keep an eye on Mike and his friends Thursday anyway," Nancy offered.

"Sounds like a plan. Bye, Nancy. I'll see you on Thursday," I greeted.

"Bye, Rachel," Nancy said.

We exchanged another smile and waved each other off as we turned back to our respective homes. I took the cigarette out of my mouth and tossed it onto the ground, stamping out the end. I felt a little bit better knowing that I had managed to make one friend. I wouldn't be completely alone when the year began. I headed back through the front door, the mail clutched in my hands as I tossed it on the counter. My parents were both hanging near the window. I knew that they had been watching me and were now curious about Nancy.

"Who was that?" Dad asked curiously.

"One of our neighbors; Nancy Wheeler," I explained, glaring at them. I should have known they would be watching me. "She's in my year. She offered to show me around Hawkins this week before school starts."

"See?" Dad said, slinging an arm over my shoulder. "Living in Hawkins could be more fun than you think. You're already making friends."

"One friend, Dad," I said, pushing his arm off of me.

"After only being here for a few hours? You're not doing too bad, kid," he countered.

"How about dinner?" Mom offered, sensing that I still wasn't thrilled

with being in Hawkins.

"Sure," Dad and I said together.

"Set the table?" Dad asked me.

"Yeah," I responded.

Mom began cooking as I grabbed the plates and placemats, moving them into their spots around the table. I gathered the utensils from their spots still in the boxes and tossed them onto the table. My parents were laughing and joking in the kitchen as they began cooking the chicken - the only meal Dad had brought with us. I took a deep breath as I watched them with a smile. Maybe living in Hawkins wouldn't be that bad. Maybe this could be a fresh start for me. Maybe this place could feel like a second home.

Once I had finished setting the table, I stood at the window of our new home and smiled, looking out into the already fallen yellow and orange leaves. I'd never had the chance to enjoy the fall season before. Back in Florida, the weather always felt like we were living in the middle of summer. I could only remember a few days that the weather had fallen under thirty degrees. It was going to be a strange adjustment living in Hawkins, Indiana, but we had to be here. It was all we could do to protect our family.

The fallen leaves sat uninterrupted in our driveway and the street beyond. I stared at them, allowing myself a brief moment to wish I was back in Florida, laying on the beach with my friends, not sitting in Hawkins, Indiana, wondering what the first day of the new school year would bring. I was going to be the new kid, something I had never been before. I wasn't looking forward to that. I was three-years-old when I was adopted and had grown up with those people. I had never been the new kid before. Everyone had always known me.

This first day of school was going to be different. I was going to have to deal with the teenagers at Hawkins High School who wanted to know all about me. I would have to come up with a boring story about why I had moved from Florida to the boring town of Hawkins. I would have to explain so many things. The only interruption from my depressing thoughts was the deafening roaring of a car engine

from which Cum on Feel the Noize by Quiet Riot was blaring over the radio. I smiled as I tried to find the car.

"What the hell is that?" Dad asked, walking up to the window.

He was standing over my shoulder as I leaned up onto my toes to look down the street. I spotted the car but didn't get much of a chance to linger on it. The vehicle was gone before I got much of a chance to look at it. It only narrowly avoided the movers, who jumped back with screams. I had to resist a smile I tried to fight back a laugh. The car was a 1979 Chevrolet Camaro, the same car I had. The only difference was that this car was deep blue and my Camaro was jet black. I didn't see the driver though I did spot a woman in the passenger seat.

"Gosh, he needs to slow down," Mom commented, glancing up from her spot in the kitchen. "He could kill someone driving like that."

"See, Dad? Looks like I'm not the only one who likes that car," I teased, throwing my head back to where the car had shot down the road.

Dad frowned as he stares at the car, continuing to rocket down the road. "What if I bought you a new -?"

"No," I interrupted him.

It didn't matter how much he hated my car, I was never giving my baby up. "You know, honey, it doesn't make me feel better knowing that you share any of the same tastes as whoever that car belongs to," Dad said bitterly.

I smiled, my blue eyes glittering. "Relax, Dad, I'm sure that's the only similarity we share," I teased, rubbing my hand over my right wrist again.

A/N: In canon *Stranger Things*, Billy and Max show up a few days before Halloween and most of the season takes place over the course of about a week. Now, that's not enough time to introduce a character and set up dynamics in a story to me, so I'm going to go ahead and pretend that the Hargrove's actually arrived in Hawkins at

the start of the year, giving me about another two-and-a-half months of character interaction to play with. Just a quick head's up! I know the dates aren't accurate and that was intentional.

Also, this chapter is short. It just serves as an introduction to Rachel and her family. The following chapters will be longer and more detailed! By the way, yes, that is the real spelling of Cum on Feel the Noize! Also, if you want to follow the progress on my updates, I have a Twitter account you can follow: @walkerlifeforme.

2. Chapter Two

The week leading up to my first day at Hawkins High School seemed to move faster and faster with each passing day. The hours shrank away, leaving me closer and closer to earning the dreaded title of the new kid. As hard as I tried, I couldn't fight the sunrise on Monday morning, one week after I had arrived in Hawkins. I ignored the chirping of my alarm clock as long as possible until I knew it was time to wake up and get ready for the day. Being the new kid would be bad enough; being late on top of that would have been even worse.

Living in Hawkins wasn't as bad as I had initially expected it to be; of course, I hadn't set foot in Hawkins High School yet. With all the time I would be spending there over the next two years, it would be a big deciding factor in whether I enjoyed or hated Hawkins. So far, I had enjoyed most of my time in the small town. I had spent most of the early part of the week since I had arrived in Hawkins wandering every corner of the town. Hawkins reminded me of a place out of a storybook.

I'd taken some long drives through the backroads of Hawkins during my first few days here. Sometimes it was an attempt to get some fresh air with the windows down and music blaring, other days it was because I was trying to find the small lakes that my father had told me about when we'd first arrived. It didn't matter how hard I tried to find them, I never stumbled upon one. As my father had only heard about them, we had no way to know where they were. I didn't have a map of Hawkins, but I was determined to find them. I would much rather swim in an empty lake than a filled community pool.

Before our first official outing as friends in downtown Hawkins, I ended up spending many of my afternoons with Nancy. The two of us had been getting to know each other well over the last week. Nancy liked hanging out and talking outside where we didn't have to worry about our parents overhearing any of our conversations. Other times, I drove us around town as Nancy pointed out some of Hawkins' local spots including the movie theater and some restaurants that she mentioned would be good for dates.

According to Nancy, she was happy to get out in public with another girl after she had spent so long hanging around guys like Steve and Jonathan. Though she didn't mention it often, I knew Nancy missed Barbara. It was something we shared; we both missed our best friends. After knowing her for a few days, I had invited Nancy into my house. She loved the messiness of my bedroom with my things thrown all over the place. It was nothing like hers. My parents were thrilled to see that I had made a friend so quickly.

A few times, Nancy had invited me over to her house. It was a cute home but it seemed like everything inside was suppressed. Her father was quiet and barely looked in my direction other than to give me a disgusted once-over when he saw the way I dressed. Nancy's mother was sweet enough but didn't seem content in her picture-perfect family. Nancy did once let slip that she didn't think her parents had ever loved each other, rather, they had wanted their nuclear family and settled for each other.

It was sad to hear. My parents could be nightmares when they got involved in my personal lives but they were also my favorite people in the world. I also knew that they loved each other more than life itself. It made it a little sad being in Nancy's house. It was no wonder that she was the way she was. It seemed like Nancy could be a fun person to be around - and she was - but she had been stifled because of her family. I wondered what she would be like when she was away from them. She deserved to be her real self.

As promised, I had spent the majority of Thursday hanging out with Nancy as we explored downtown together. Downtown Hawkins was a town square surrounding a clock tower building in the center that housed the Public Library. Most of the stores were cute mom-and-pop shops. The most fascinating store downtown was Melvald's General Store, which wasn't saying much. I did divulge to Nancy that I missed the big malls back in Florida. She mentioned that she would love to go to one someday.

While we had been wandering around downtown, Nancy had introduced me to her younger brother Mike and the rest of his friends, Will Byers, Lucas Sinclair, and Dustin Henderson. Mike seemed to be the leader of their small group. Will was a little more on the shy side and Lucas was a bit neurotic. I did like Dustin, who

had cleidocranial dysplasia, a bone disorder. So far, he was my favorite of the kids. The four of them seemed like sweet little kids, though I hadn't spent much time around children in my life.

On Friday, Nancy formally introduced me to her boyfriend, Steve Harrington. Though she mentioned he had once been a jock with a bad attitude, he seemed very nice to me and we got along well during the few times we'd hung out. Nancy and Steve seemed to be close but they didn't seem to have the romantic connection I normally saw with couples. It was very obvious to me that Steve was head-over-heels in love with Nancy, but she seemed to be trying to distance herself from him. It made me feel terribly for him. They both deserved better.

Steve ended up hanging out with the two of us again the Sunday before school started back up and promised me that he would introduce me to his friends. I hadn't said anything but I knew that Steve had been able to gather that I didn't want to feel like I only had two friends. Steve had promised that his friends would warm up to me quickly, but judging by the look on Nancy's face, Steve's friends weren't the kind of people I would like. According to her, they were exactly like Steve used to be.

Though we had only known each other for a week, Nancy and I had become very close. She had told me all about her friendship with Barbara and I had told her many of my adventures with Casey. Nancy had sat with me on Saturday afternoon when I had called Casey and I had been able to somewhat introduce the two girls to each other. I was glad to see that they had hit it off. It was nice to know that I was going to have at least one real friend before starting my first day at Hawkins High School.

As much as I did enjoy hanging out with Nancy, I did miss having Casey in my life. Our phone calls were good but I missed being able to see my best friend in person. We talked almost every day and every day she would ask about my new life. During each conversation, I continued to insist upon Casey that Hawkins wasn't that interesting. At her badgering, I promised to tell Casey all about my first day at my new school. I also continued to force Casey to tell the rest of my friends back in Florida that I loved and missed them.

My parents had also been doing their best to enjoy their time in Hawkins. As they had told me at least three times before, they enjoyed the slower pace. I knew that they were just trying to make me feel better about the move as it had mainly been my fault. My mother had made decent friends with the other local mothers. My father had become familiar with the other families in the neighborhood, but they hadn't become good friends. On the bright side, he did get himself an engineering job at the local power plant. He did seem to enjoy his job.

Once I'd finally pushed myself out of bed, I slowly began getting dressed for the day. I briefly considered trying to dress down to blend a little bit into the crowd but ultimately decided that I wasn't going to bother. People may as well know the kind of person I was. If they were going to like me, they may as well like the real person I was. So, I dug through my pile of clothes on the floor, throwing them into a new pile on the other end of the bedroom before finally settling on the outfit I wanted to wear.

I stood in front of the floor-length mirror as I began getting dressed, throwing on a red-and-black checkered shirt over my low-cut Ramones t-shirt. I knew that my parents wouldn't be happy with the extremely low neckline of the shirt, but I didn't care. I had always loved it. I tossed on my worn black leather jacket over that and a pair of acid-washed jeans that were torn at the knees. I pulled my long blonde locks over my shoulders to scrunch my hair and grabbed my beat-up boots. I wrapped a choker around my neck and nodded at myself in the mirror. It was good enough.

I decided to go a little easier on my makeup than most of the girls in school likely would. I had never liked the bright-blue eyeshadow trend that had become so popular over the last few months. It looked too cartoonish. I instead painted on what my father called my 'raccoon eyes' and a muted lip. I knew that my parents didn't love my makeup any more than they loved my clothes, but I had always loved the way the black liner made my bright blue eyes pop. My eyes had always been my favorite feature.

Once I had finished getting ready, I gathered my backpack and shoved my books into it. The day after we had arrived in Hawkins, I had gone with my mother to Hawkins High School and handed over

my old transcripts. The principal had been able to slip me into most of the classes I'd wanted and I was grateful for it. I didn't want to wind up in any remedial classes. I was smart enough to be in all advanced placement classes, just as I was in my old high school. I tossed my textbooks, notebooks, and pencils into my bag and slung it over my shoulder.

I tucked my pack of cigarettes and lighter into my jacket pocket and pushed a hair tie onto my left wrist. Once I was satisfied that I looked okay and had everything I needed, I grabbed my car keys, aviator sunglasses, and headed into the hallway, kicking my door closed behind me. I headed downstairs and dropped my things on the counter so I could grab breakfast. My parents were already downstairs; Dad was reading the paper before he had to leave for work and Mom was making breakfast.

"Morning," I greeted, walking over to the dining room table.

"Good morning, darling," Mom chirped happily.

"Breakfast?" Dad offered, throwing his head back toward the kitchen.

"I'm not that hungry but I will take an apple," I said.

"That's it?" Mom asked.

"Yeah," I muttered. "I'm not feeling like eating."

The lack of confidence in my voice was enough to surprise them. Dad stood up, patting me gently on the back. "Don't be nervous, kid. Everything's going to be okay. The kids at school will love you," he commented.

"That's not what I'm nervous about, Dad," I mumbled.

It had only taken one stupid mistake for me to get us stuck in Hawkins. What if I ended up making that same mistake again? "You're going to be okay. No one cares that much about the new students. You're going to be interesting for a day or two and then people get over it," Dad said. I shrugged. Being the center of attention wouldn't make things any easier. "You'll be blending into the crowd in no time."

"Not in that outfit," Mom muttered pointedly. I rolled my eyes. My parents hated my clothing choices. "You didn't like the outfit I laid out for you?"

Before I had gone to sleep last night, I had seen the outfit laid out on my bed. It was a pair of high-waisted khakis and a white button-down shirt with a pastel sweater that was meant to go over it. "That was for me?" I asked, my eyebrows shooting up to my forehead. "I thought you were shipping it off to the convent."

I smiled at my mother, who was scowling back at me. "I should have shipped you off to the convent," she snapped.

"Just kidding," I chirped.

We smiled at each other as I sat at the counter, taking a large bite out of my apple. I glanced out the window and after a few minutes started to see cars flying down the road. I imagined that most of them were students heading to school or parents driving them there. I wrung my fingers together as I watched them. I was somewhere between excited and nervous for my first day. Once I had finished my apple, I tossed the rind into the trash and glanced up at the clock. It was already a quarter past seven. School started at seven-thirty.

"Shit," I gasped, springing up from the table. "I have to go."

"Rachel. Language," Mom chided.

"Right. See you two later!" I called back.

"Have a good day!" Mom called after me.

"We can't wait to hear all about the day later!" Dad shouted.

"Bye, guys!" I yelled.

They were both waving at me as I kissed them both on the cheek before grabbing my things and taking off. I burst through the front door and sprinted toward the front door, practically flying into my car. I had seen Steve's car come to pick up Nancy about ten minutes ago. They would be waiting for me in the parking lot. I had to get the hell out of here to make sure I wouldn't be late. I slung my things

into the passenger seat and stepped on the brakes, starting the engine as the car roared to life.

I slammed on the gas and reversed out of the driveway, likely leaving skid marks as I threw the car into drive and shot down the road faster than I had since I'd arrived in Hawkins. I soared down the backroads toward the high school at nearly sixty miles an hour, desperately hoping that I wouldn't be late. I didn't want to draw even more attention to myself than I already would. I wound up grinding into the parking lot five minutes before the first bell went off. I pulled into a spot in the empty section of the lot and relaxed slightly.

I was antsier than I had expected to be on my first day at Hawkins High School. My knees were bouncing as I sat back in the car and listened to the radio for a moment. I lit myself a cigarette as I waited for the bell. Steve's car was on the other side of the parking lot. At least I knew where to go when I was ready to get out of the car. I saw a lot of eyes directed at my car; likely because no one had ever seen it before and because I was playing my music far louder than anyone else in the parking lot. I was almost ready to get out of the car when I heard something in the distance.

Everyone in the parking lot stood upright when they heard the blaring of a car radio coming closer. I wasn't the only person to look up from their spot. I glanced over as a car shot over to my side of the parking lot. It was the same blue Chevrolet Camaro that I had seen blazing down the road my first day here. I arched an eyebrow. So, the driver wasn't an adult. It was another teenager. Today the car was blaring 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' by Scorpions. Every eye in the parking lot was drawn to the car with its blaring music.

Both guys and girls were watching closely as the car stopped almost too late three spots down from me. It was thrown into 'park' and the engine turned off as a young child got out. I smiled at the little red-headed girl. It was the woman I'd seen last week. It must have been the driver's sister. She jumped on her skateboard and headed toward the middle school. The door was then thrown open to reveal the driver, who slammed his booted foot onto the asphalt. The boy got out of the car and turned toward the school as he slammed the door behind him before turning back.

The boy had sandy blonde hair that was done up in a curly mullet. It wasn't a style that I normally liked on guys, but it looked damn good on the boy. I grinned. Maybe there was a hot rocker dude in Hawkins. The boy was in a jean jacket, white sweater, and light-wash jeans that hugged him in all the right places. He even had small gold hoops in his ears. I smiled as I threw open my car door, letting AC/DC's 'You Shook Me All Night Long' blare. The faces in the lot briefly turned from the handsome boy to me.

It wasn't just the students who turned to look at me. The boy's head also swiveled in my direction when he realized that the others were looking my way. We were both puffing on a cigarette, his much lower than mine. I met his eyes, giving him a pointed half-quirked smile. He returned it, winking at me. I chuckled, puffing on the cigarette again. He was a major flirt. My gaze shifted to his car. It was exactly the model I'd thought it was. I nodded to the boy's car, ignoring the fact that everyone was going to listen to our conversation.

"You've got good taste," I called to him, shutting my car engine off.

The parking lot was plunged into silence as the boy ran his tongue over his teeth flirtatiously. "So do you," he replied, his voice deep and gravely.

I didn't need to be able to read his mind to know that he also meant himself. I kicked my car door closed and walked over to the boy's, acutely aware of the students' gazes that were turned our way. I was also aware of the boy's eyes. He didn't hide that he was looking at my body and I didn't tell him to stop. It didn't bother me. I thought it was flattering. I listened to the clicking of my booted heels as I crossed the parking spots to meet the boy. I spotted the California license plate on the boy's car and nodded to it.

"A fellow kindred spirit," I noted.

The boy nodded as I took another puff of my cigarette, blowing the smoke into his face. He struck me as the type that loved the tease. I knew that I was right when he didn't hesitate to step into me. "Good taste in cars. Good taste in music..." he trailed off.

"Oh, those aren't my only good tastes," I replied, grinning at him.

He chuckled as I ran my tongue over my glossed lips. I didn't miss the way that his eyes darkened. "Rachel!" Nancy's voice yelled, interrupting my salacious thoughts. She darted into my vision, hanging at my shoulder. "Hey, glad you made it."

It took me a few seconds to break the eye contact I had with the boy. "Did I have much of a choice?" I asked Nancy.

She smiled at me before giving the boy a nervous look. "Come on," Nancy said, gently tugging at my arm. "We should go and get your schedule."

"Yeah, okay," I said, letting out a deep breath. I flashed the boy a brilliant smile before looking back at Nancy. "Let's go."

"You didn't even get my name," the boy called after me.

The boy's voice feigned hurt but he still wore his flirtatious smile, meeting my eyes with a flash of danger in his eyes, his cigarette hanging from his lips. I turned back to him with a smirk, shaking my head. "Oh, I don't need it," I chirped, which I said for two very different reasons. "I'll see you around."

The boy took a deep inhale of smoke as he passed me so close that his arm brushes gently against my chest. Nancy stepped back away from the boy, her hand still wrapped protectively around my other arm. The boy breathed smoke into my face, the way I had done to him earlier. I could feel my head pounding in my chest as he growled, "See you later, Rach."

No one had ever called me by a nickname. I had always gone by Rachel. "It's Rachel," I corrected.

It took me a moment too long to realize that he had shifted us around to place me up against his car. Nancy's possessive grip on my arm had been broken when I'd moved. I could tell that she wanted me away from the boy, who either didn't notice or didn't care that everyone was watching us. The boy reached over and pressed an arm against the car, trapping me in between us. My heart hammered with excitement. No one had ever been as immediately bold with me as this boy had.

"It's Billy," the boy said.

His voice was dark and made a shiver work its way up my spine. A grin split my lips as Nancy said, "Rachel, come on."

I flashed a little wink in Billy's direction as I took a deep breath and moved toward the school. He grinned back at me. I didn't want a boyfriend as I didn't plan on staying in Hawkins longer than I had to, but that didn't mean I couldn't have a little fun. Especially not with the hot new guy. Billy glanced around the parking lot briefly before flicking his cigarette into the grass and heading down the hill toward the high school. Every gaze followed his movements. I noticed three girls near me watching him walk.

"Who is that?" a light brunette in a bright blue sweater asked.

She and the rest of her friends were smirking as they watching Billy walk off. "I have no idea, but would you check out that ass?" the second girl asked. "Just look at it go."

The last girl grinned happily, watching Billy walk as she twirled her hair around her fingers. They lowered their voices, but I could still hear them. "Looks like he's got an eye for the new girl," she whispered.

"Please," the first girl snapped. "Who would like a girl like that?"

I smiled bitterly as I walked past the trio of girls with Nancy and Steve walking hand-in-hand behind me. "The new guy, it seems," I said as I passed the girls.

Their jaws dropped as I walked past, smiling and flashing the girls a little wink. I knew that they were horrified that I had overheard them. If I was being honest, I didn't care much about their insult. I had anticipated some nasty responses from the girls at Hawkins High School. That was the thing about girls; we were territorial. I didn't care. I wasn't going to step back just because some of the local Hawkins girls felt a little threatened. I walked off toward the school in the same direction Billy had with Steve and Nancy at my sides.

The smile on my face faded as I glanced up at the school with a deep

breath. I missed my old school. I missed seeing everyone running around playing volleyball over the fence and coming into morning classes soaking wet from a quick morning trip to the beach. Hawkins High School was dreadfully boring with its muted orange brick face and students who were all carbon copies of each other. The only interesting thing was the tiger poster that reflected the school mascot. I frowned as we walked forward. I was broken from my thoughts by Nancy's voice.

"Thirty seconds into the year and you're already flirting with the new guy?"

I'd figured he was new from the California tags on his car and the way everyone had looked at him curiously. "What's wrong with flirting with the new guy?" I shot back. "He's hot and I'm sure I'm not the only one to notice. Hell, I know I'm not the only one to notice."

"He looks like a dick," Steve chimed in.

"They're the hottest ones, Harrington," I replied. Nancy looked down with a little smile on her face. I looked between the two of them with a knowing grin. "You both know I'm right."

Steve glanced at his girlfriend and scowled. "Oh, come on. I wasn't that bad."

"Eh..." Nancy shrugged.

I laughed at the pair. "You never know. You two might warm up to him," I said, throwing my arm over Nancy's shoulder.

"That's doubtful," Steve huffed.

"Oh, come on. He flirted and I flirted back. What's the crime?" I asked.

"You've got a taste for danger, my friend," Steve said.

That was where Steve was correct. I did have a taste for danger and Billy was the kind of danger I liked. "I'm already the weird new kid. I may as well have some fun with it," I told them.

"That much fun?" Nancy asked disbelievingly.

"Absolutely," I said happily.

The three of us laughed as we walked off. I noticed that the air between Nancy and Steve seemed to be a little less tense when I was around them and I was happy to help out their relationship. Steve and Nancy had been good friends to me over the last week. I felt like I wasn't completely alone now that I was friends with them. Nancy took my arm and gently led me toward the front office to grab what I would need. We said goodbye to Steve along the way, who had to get to his first class of the day.

Nancy stayed with me as I grabbed my class schedule and padlock for my locker. It was the first time I'd ever had a locker as we didn't have them in Florida. I noticed that the gazes of the students remained on me with each movement I made throughout the morning. Boys whispered about my appearance and stared at my curves. It made me grit my teeth in annoyance. They could have at least been a little less obvious about it. The girls all whispered snarky comments about me. Again, it was nothing I hadn't expected. I had known that the girls wouldn't like me.

After Nancy had left for class, I did briefly spot Billy in the office and smile at him. We stood near each other without speaking for a moment before we were called away to get our respective schedules. I liked mine enough. I was taking Advanced Placement Language and Composition, Advanced Placement European History, Advanced Placement Calculus, Advanced Placement Chemistry, Advanced Placement Physics, and my one extracurricular, swimming. I noticed Billy standing over my shoulder as I looked over the schedule.

"Jesus," he scoffed. "Do you plan on ever having fun?"

I looked up at him and smirked. "Oh, I have plenty of fun. I've also got a plan for the future."

Billy leered over my shoulder and snatched the schedule from my hands and read it over. I rolled my eyes as I leaned back against the desk, placing myself up against his arm. "Chemistry..." Billy said, a half-grin in his voice. "You planning on offering to tutor?"

"Something tells me you don't need any help with chemistry," I replied.

"You can teach me something about chemistry..." Billy said, pressing himself against me. "I can teach you something, too."

Heat spread over my chest as I tried to keep the blush from spreading upward to my cheeks. "I'm not so sure you'd be teaching me anything," I said, turning into him.

Billy smirked, looking down at me. "You can always get better." My body buzzed with a strong desire to say yes. Billy's spare hand fell against the zipper of my jacket. I swallowed thickly as he gently tugged me into him. "It could be a productive evening. Hours spent studying chemistry, just you and me," Billy said, leaving even an atom of space between us.

I was about two seconds away from saying yes to him when the class bell rang. Saved by the bell... I gently pushed Billy off of me and walked past him. "If you'll excuse me," I said, feeling like I could finally take in another breath. It didn't take me long to notice that Billy was following me down the hallway. I raised my eyebrow at him. "I know you're not going to AP Language."

"What makes you think that?" Billy asked. "You're not the only smart student here."

I narrowed my eyes at him. No way. "Favorite novel?" I asked.

Billy grinned. "I'd rather examine something a little more tangible."

A smirk broke over my lips. He had used a big word, at least. I was about to shoot back a retort when he backed away into the standard algebra class with many of our fellow students. I laughed under my breath and rolled my eyes, walking away from him with my hips swinging. I knew that Billy's eyes were just one pair that were following my movements through the halls. I could hear the girls near me griping, likely about Billy's quick interest in me, but I ignored them. Their feelings toward me were not my problem.

My first class of the day passed without anything truly interesting

happening. The teacher was a middle-aged woman that I didn't like very much. She didn't seem to have much tolerance for any fun in her classroom. She did have a good taste in books, though. The first book that we were going to be reading was Don Quixote, which had always been one of my favorite books. I noticed that the class was mostly senior students. I figured that most of my classes would be full of seniors rather than other juniors.

As our classes were only forty-five minutes long, we only had a chance to discuss the book summary before being released to our next class. I went to European history, which was a small class. We spent the majority of the class mainly focusing on a syllabus review. I ended up getting stuck at a three-person table with two senior boys who were far too interested in me for my liking. I would have much rather listened to the lecture than be forced to sit next to the moronic jocks who only joined the class because there were no other openings.

Calculus came up next and I was quick to notice that I was one of only two females in the class. The rest were senior boys who looked like they belonged in the AV Club. Our teacher - a man in his late fifties - mainly ignored us. The other girl in the class - a senior named Amy - and I sat next to each other but didn't speak other than to introduce ourselves at the beginning of class. We had one thing in common. We were both women in a place we weren't wanted. Amy and I quickly formed a silent bond, rolling our eyes at the student's and teacher's comments.

When I finally made my way out of calculus and into chemistry, I had a hard time not laughing. I kept thinking about my conversation with Billy this morning. He managed to catch my eye as I walked into the class and blushed as he shot me a wink. I tried to remind myself that he was an asshole, already surrounded by other girls, but I was still very interested in him. The chemistry class wasn't very interesting, but I had to take it. I did however spend much of the class thinking that studying chemistry with Billy would have been far more interesting.

Just as I had expected, many students tried to speak to me throughout the day. They wanted to know where I was from, why I had moved to Hawkins, and all about my life. I wanted to tell them

to go to hell but instead settled with answering them with as boring of statements as possible. These people didn't need to know everything about me. I shot down most of the questions, instead, trying to push the conversations back to the others. It didn't matter. No matter how boring I made things, people still seemed fascinated with me.

At lunch later that afternoon, I met up with Nancy and Steve and sat at the table with them that had been claimed as theirs. I sat on Nancy's right side with Steve on Nancy's left. They were trying to make sure I felt comfortable around so many people I didn't know. I spotted many gazes straying toward me and even had some boys ask me what I was planning on doing that night. I told every boy that asked me out that I was planning on finishing unpacking my room - even though that wasn't true, I had already finished unpacking.

It wasn't just Steve, Nancy, and I at our table. Some of their other friends were at the table with us. Tommy H. and Carol were at the other end of the table, mostly absorbed in themselves and their relationship. The girls from the parking lot this morning were also at the table, spending much of lunch glaring at me. The students at the table were mostly discussing the other new student, Billy Hargrove, as I'd learned his last name was. While many people were interested in me, they were even more interested in Billy. I was grateful that he had drawn some attention away from me.

I was about to dig into my mashed potatoes when I realized that I had forgotten to grab a fork. I stood up from the table to go and grab one. "Rachel?" Nancy asked, looking up as I walked off. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just forgot my fork. I'll be right back," I told her.

Some of the girls at the table began muttering among themselves as I walked off. I headed back into the cafeteria and walked over toward the utensils. I grabbed a fork for my potatoes and was about to head back to the table when a larger boy, likely a senior, stepped in front of me with a wild grin. He was wearing a spirit jersey and had long dark brown hair. He reminded me of the football players at my old high school. I sighed. Football players were not and never would be my type. I tried to push past the jock but he stepped in front of me again.

"You must be the new girl," the football player greeted.

"So I keep hearing," I replied dully.

"I'm Mark."

"Rachel."

We stood in silence for a moment, staring at each other. He didn't see the boredom in my eyes. "Are you planning on going to the game this weekend?" Mark finally asked.

"Game?" I asked.

No one had said anything about a football game to me. "The big welcome-back football game. It's on the first weekend of the new school year. Everyone always goes," Mark explained.

I'd only been to two football games in my life and I hadn't enjoyed either one. "Oh, I don't know," I told Mark.

"I could use some support," he teased.

He was trying to flirt with me, but he wasn't my type and I was bored with our conversation already. "A star football player needs support from a new girl he barely knows?" I asked irritably.

"We could get to know each other," Mark offered.

I had to fight extremely hard to not roll my eyes. I wanted nothing to do with Mark. He was not my type. "Maybe another time, Mark," I offered. "Football games aren't my kind of thing."

"Have you ever been?" Mark asked.

"I've been to a couple and never enjoyed them," I admitted.

"Maybe I can change your mind," Mark teased.

"Rach."

The nickname could have only come from one person. I turned back as Billy walked up to my side, standing as close to me as he had this

morning. I glanced up and nodded at him. "Hey, Billy," I greeted.

All three of us stared at each other for a moment. Mark was trying to smile at me but seemed unnerved with Billy standing so close. He must have been waiting for Billy to leave, but Billy wasn't backing down. Mark finally admitted defeat, his chest deflating slightly. "I'll see you around, Rach," Mark said.

"It's Rachel," I hissed as Mark walked off. I turned back to Billy with another scowl on my face. "That goes for you too."

"You should be thanking me, Rach," Billy teased.

"For being an asshole?" I asked.

"For saving you from jockstrap over there," Billy said.

The only thing Billy was doing was showing that he didn't want any other guys flirting with me. "We both know that you weren't saving me," I told him. Billy arched an eyebrow as if to ask what I meant. I rolled my eyes and threw my head back toward where Mark had gone. "Asserting your dominance already, I see?"

Billy grinned but didn't look like he was planning on denying it. "Just accept the help."

"I had it handled," I snapped.

"Please, I could see your eyes rolling into the back of your head from the other end of the cafeteria," Billy scoffed.

"But yet you can't see it when it's right in front of you," I replied.

Billy grinned as he stepped into me. He must have known that I wasn't serious about wanting him to stay away from me. A blush crept over my cheeks as I looked at him. "That's not how I make a woman's eyes roll back," Billy told me quietly. I swallowed a lump in my throat. Not many men could manage that, but I bet that he could. "Come on, Rach. What are you doing tonight?"

"Not you, Hargrove," I said, smiling up at him.

"We'll see," Billy said, running his tongue over his teeth.

"We will not," I snapped.

We both knew that was a lie. I rolled my eyes as Billy winked at me and ran his tongue over his lips again. The tiny hairs on my arms stood up as the two of us brushed past each other. I bumped against Billy's arm but he remained firm in his stance as I pushed past. His face was within inches of mine as I passed. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to slap him or kiss him at this point. I ignored Billy's pointed stare but continued to sway my hips as I walked back to my table. Unsurprisingly, everyone was watching me.

The moment I went back to my seat Steve said, "Where's your fork?"

"Damn it," I groaned, shoving my plate back. I wasn't getting up again. "You know what? I'm not that hungry."

"If you're not going to have it..." Steve muttered.

"Go for it, big guy," I told him.

The rest of the students at our table went back to eating as I began playing with my lighter. "So, what does Billy Hargrove have to say to Rachel Winters?" Nicole, a red-headed senior girl at our table asked.

"What? You couldn't strain your ears that hard?" I snapped irritably.

Billy didn't attempt to keep our conversation private so I wouldn't either. The girls at the table were staring at me. "What do you mean?" Carol, one of the girls who had been admiring Billy this morning, asked.

She was the same one who had insulted me. "I'm not blind or an idiot. I know you've all been listening to every conversation Billy and I have had since this morning," I said.

"I'd just like to know what he sees in you," Tina, the girl who had commented on Billy's ass sneered.

"Not an uptight pretentious bitch?" I suggested.

Nancy and Steve snorted into their lunches but otherwise remained silent. "He only likes you because you're wearing the lowest-cut shirt I've ever seen," Carol hissed, motioning to my shirt.

If she'd thought that would insult me, she was dead wrong. They didn't bother me. I liked my style and her comment proved to me that she and the rest of the girls were jealous. I snorted at the girls' laughter. They weren't going to change my mind about my shirt. I liked it just the way it was. "Yep," I said plainly.

"What?" Tina gasped.

"I've known him for about three hours. Do you think he likes my personality? He doesn't know my personality. Whatever he likes about me is completely physical," I told them. I wasn't a moron. I knew Billy didn't like me, he just liked the way I looked. "Don't believe me? I'll happily recount some of our conversations."

"You're just the new toy," Vickie, the first girl who had mentioned Billy, snapped.

"Sweetie, this is his first day here. We're all the shiny new toys. Guess I was just the shiniest," I shot back.

Tina, Vickie, Carol, and Nicole looked furious with the way I was speaking to them. I imagined that no one had ever countered them before. Much like Tommy, they must have been used to running the school. The four girls grabbed their trays and stormed away from the table just seconds before the bell rang again. I smirked at the four girls as they walked off, muttering nasty swears about me. I had never had an issue getting along with the boys. It had always been the girls that I didn't get along with.

"What the hell did you do?" Steve asked. I looked up, not understanding what he was talking about. "Rub pheromones on yourself this morning?"

I laughed as Nancy asked, "Was it like this at your old school?"

"No, but I had lived there my entire life. Everyone knew me. Like I told them, I wasn't the shiny new toy," I said.

"They'll get over you soon enough," Steve reasoned.

"Yeah? How many new kids do you get in Hawkins?" I huffed.

Steve flushed. "Fair point."

The second warning bell rang and I smiled bitterly at Steve and Nancy, standing up from the table and dumping most of my lunch into the trash can. I said goodbye to Steve and Nancy, who were going to their respective classes. I thanked the pair briefly for keeping most of the students from asking questions. I knew that they would eventually, but I could at least avoid my first day at Hawkins High School being a complete mess. I would get a few days of peace before I had to answer any difficult questions.

After lunch, once I had said goodbye to the two real friends I'd made in Hawkins, I headed to physics. I didn't like the older teacher that much as he was about as chauvinistic as they came. He said nothing to me during class and focused on the eighty percent of the students that were male. It reminded me of my calculus class earlier in the day. I was thrilled when the bell rang for the final class of the day. I only had to deal with this place for another forty-five minutes and then I could go home.

My final class of the day was swimming. The physical exercise classes were divided by gender, so I was stuck with many girls who didn't want me anywhere near them. I desperately wanted to get in the water but our coach told us that we would only be going over the strokes and our time goals would be for the first few days of class. I spent much of the class watching the boys playing basketball through the double-doors into the gym; shirts versus skins. To my pleasure, Billy was on skins. It was easy to spend the bulk of the lesson enjoying myself getting lost in daydreams.

The guys were running back and forth throughout the gym, grunting and cheering. I knew that I wasn't the only person watching them. I kept my eyes mainly on Billy as they ran. I could see why the girls were so jealous of me. To me, at least, Billy was the most attractive person at Hawkins High School, and had he not already had his eyes on me, I would have wanted them on me. Of course, I had exactly what I wanted but I'd never been one to give in to a man; I loved the

chase as much as it seemed that Billy did.

When the bell rang to alert the students that the final period of the day was ending, every student took off to head home. Most of them headed for the parking lot immediately. I heard most of the students talking about the big game that Mark had mentioned to me. A few of my new acquaintances I'd met during the day asked me if I was planning on going but I kept telling them that I wasn't sure yet. As I'd said earlier, football wasn't my thing and I didn't know if Steve and Nancy were going yet. I wasn't going to go if they weren't.

As I started getting ready to leave, heading toward the main hallway through the basketball court, I saw Billy and the rest of the male students packing up their things. I noticed Billy making eyes at many of the girls as he walked off and I rolled my eyes at him. Player... At that moment, he glanced back and smirked at me as I ran my fingers through my hair, giving him a vague smile in return. Billy ran his tongue over his lips and winked at me from across the court. I rolled my eyes playfully, picking up my things from the bench and heading out.

Before heading out to the parking lot I stopped by the front office to gather the paperwork that my parents would have to fill out before the end of the week. They were enrollment forms and other paperwork that hadn't been ready for us when we'd come to enroll me in the school last week. I was on my way back to my locker to grab the books that I had left while I was in swimming class, cigarette and lighter in hand, when I ran into Steve and Nancy. They were likely heading out to Steve's car.

"Hey, Rachel," Nancy greeted. "I'm heading home with Steve."

"Yeah, I'll head out soon. I have to get my books from my locker," I said, motioning back through the hallway. "I'll see you a little later."

"See you at home," Nancy said.

They were about to walk off when Steve stopped, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Rachel. It'll get better," he promised.

"Yeah? That doesn't instill much confidence coming from the

supposed king of Hawkins High School," I teased.

Steve laughed, patting me on the back. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Steve," I said. I was about to walk off again when I spotted the college essay Steve had been griping about when I'd met him a few days prior in his hands. I nodded down to it. "Good luck with that college essay."

"Thanks," Steve chuckled.

As most of the students headed to their cars I wandered back into the school to gather my things. I needed my books and then I could head home. I walked into the main hallway and to my locker, grabbing the books that I needed to do the little bit of homework I had gotten for the first day. I stuffed my things into my bag and grabbed my car keys, heading back toward the parking lot. About half of the cars were already gone. I figured that no one wanted to hang around school longer than they had to on the first day.

Once I had gotten to my car, I tossed my backpack into the passenger seat. I vaguely took note that Billy's car was still in the parking lot. I stood at my door for a moment, trying desperately to light my cigarette before I left but I couldn't get the lighter to ignite. It wasn't the wind - the air had been mostly still all day. The damn lighter must have been out of fuel. It had been a long time since I'd refilled it. I muttered a few curses under my breath as I tried to get the lighter to ignite, but it seemed that I was out of luck.

"Having a problem?"

My head snapped up to see that Billy was leaning on my car, watching me with a playful grin. "You following me, Hargrove?" I snapped.

"You'd be so lucky, Winters," Billy replied.

His eyes flashed with playful malice. I rolled my eyes so far back into my head that I thought they would get stuck there. I had heard others say his last name all day but I wasn't sure how he found out mine. We didn't have any classes together so he hadn't heard a teacher say

it. I assumed that he had probably asked around until someone had told him. I doubted that Steve or Nancy would have told him (or that Billy would have spoken to them) but maybe Tommy had. I noticed the lighter in Billy's hand and dropped my eyes to it.

"While you're standing here, you may as well be useful," I said.

Billy grinned, flicking the lighter open and igniting it. "Come here."

My heart gave a pathetic little flutter as I moved toward Billy. He reminded me of the kind of guy I had always wanted. I loved the kind of guy that wasn't afraid to go after what he wanted. I put the cigarette up to my mouth, slipping it between my lips. Billy took his lighter and lit the end as I took in a deep breath, feeling my nerves relax immediately. I held the smoke in for a moment before puffing it back out into Billy's face as he still hadn't moved back away. I sent him a playful grin as I straightened back up.

"Thank you," I said.

"That's the only way you can think of to thank me?" Billy asked.

I arched my eyebrow at the bluntness of his statement. "Really?"

Billy laughed, throwing his head back for a moment before looking back at me with piercing eyes. "Don't think so lowly of me, Rach. Maybe I just meant by getting a drink," Billy said.

It was my turn to laugh now. "Oh, I don't think so," I said. Billy looked surprised at my outright denial. "You've already got a long line of suitors."

Billy chuckled, looking at the ground before meeting my eyes again. "Rach," he purred. I had already given up on trying to get him to call me by my full name. I knew he wouldn't. Billy moved toward me, lowering his head to speak into my ear with a deep growl. "We can't just be friends?"

"I know exactly what being your friend would be like," I replied, turning my head into his.

"You should be jumping at the chance, then," Billy teased.

"Someone thinks highly of themselves," I commented.

Billy shrugged proudly. "I've never had any complaints."

"We wouldn't want to risk ruining that perfect record," I said, my resolve beginning to die.

"It won't be ruined," Billy said confidently. "It'll be the best -"

"Three minutes of my life?" I interrupted.

The bright smile on my face did nothing to quell Billy's distaste for my comment. He took my jacket tightly in his hands and yanked me into him. I stumbled forward into his chest, having not been expecting his grip to be as tight as it was. His hands were still wrapped around my jacket as I placed a hand against his chest, unsure if I was trying to pull him into me or push him away. My breaths were coming out in heavy pants as I looked up at him. I wasn't afraid of Billy; I didn't want to admit what I felt for him. Judging by the look on his face, though, he already knew.

"Nervous?" Billy asked, speaking so close to my ear that I could feel his jaw moving against mine.

Yes. "Not even slightly, Hargrove," I hissed.

If Billy had been angry about my comment (I assumed that he wasn't), he didn't show it. "Come on, Rach," Billy said, running his tongue over his teeth, something I found myself enjoying more and more each time he did it. "What's wrong with having a little fun?"

"You want this?" I asked boldly. Billy smirked at me as I dropped my hand to rest on his belt. I must have surprised him as his eyes widened and his lower stomach muscles clenched. "Work for it." Billy chuckled, not releasing his grip on my jacket. I gently shoved his belt from my hand. "In the meantime, it looks like you've got plenty of willing study partners."

The two of us glanced around and chuckled at the huge portion of the student body who were watching us. The remaining half of the students who were still at school were all intently watching our interaction. I rolled my eyes. Billy would be beloved by the rest of

the school because he was attractive and bold and I would be hated because Billy had shown the most interest in me on the first day. I wondered briefly if Billy would eventually lose interest in me. It wouldn't be that shocking. He seemed the type to flit from woman to woman.

It was a moment later that I realized that Billy didn't just appear to be speaking to me, it looked like he was waiting for someone. "What are you still doing here?" I asked Billy suddenly. "I pegged you for the type to be out of school the second the bell rang."

Billy grinned again, but this one didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm waiting for someone."

"With no date?" I asked, surprised.

Billy looked me up and down, his eyes resting at my low-cut shirt. He didn't attempt to pretend he wasn't staring down my shirt. "They're not my type," Billy said pointedly.

"Hargrove, everyone's your type," I shot back.

Billy smirked at me as I rolled my eyes. I was certain that many girls had shown some interest in Billy and he had likely responded to them to a degree, but for whatever reason, he seemed to have set his sights on me. I reached up and took a long drag from my cigarette. I didn't realize until it was too late that my leather jacket sleeve had moved upward and revealed my wrist. Billy had been watching my every movement since he'd walked over to me and I was positive he'd seen. He confirmed my thought when he spoke.

"You've got a tattoo?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," I muttered awkwardly.

I'd never enjoyed explaining my tattoo to new people, but I knew Billy wouldn't leave it alone. I moved my sleeve up to reveal the tiny tattoo on my right wrist, two zeros followed by the number one. "One?" Billy asked curiously, taking my hand in his.

I laughed awkwardly. "You get a little too drunk at a Halloween party one year and start thinking you're the number one person on the

planet and next thing you know, you have the number one tattooed on you forever," I muttered dumbly, lying right through my teeth.

Thankfully, Billy didn't notice. Instead, he laughed and said, "I like it."

I smiled in response. "Thank you."

"That your only one?" Billy asked curiously.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I teased.

Billy grinned at me, pushing my body up against the door of his car. Somehow, I had followed him to his car during our back-and-forth. "I would," he said, looking down at me.

My voice seemed to be stuck in my throat. I wasn't sure what to do when I saw a flash of bright red and heard a sharp scoff. Both Billy and I glanced over to see that the little red-headed girl from this morning had arrived at the car. I blushed and tried to move - hoping to not scar the little girl too early in life - but Billy didn't seem concerned that she had seen us. Instead, he lowered his mouth to my ear as the red-headed girl groaned in disgust and hopped into the car, slamming the door behind her. Billy ignored the moody pre-teen.

"You and I both know that one day I'll find out," Billy told me.

That was very likely, but I didn't need to tell him that. He didn't need his head inflated more than it already was. "Okay," I whispered, gently pushing Billy off of me and moving past him, shooting the red-headed girl a little smile. "Goodnight, Hargrove."

"Night, Rach," Billy said.

I turned back to him with a half-hearted scowl. "I'm not going to have any luck getting you to call me Rachel, am I?" I asked.

Billy walked back up to me and puffed smoke in my face. "No," he said, shooting me a wink.

Billy and I exchanged a quick grin. He gave me another wink as I rolled my eyes, taking a long drag of my cigarette and jumping into

my car. At the same time, Billy's car engine roared to life as his radio blasted 'Hot for Teacher' by Van Halen. I chuckled. At least he had good taste. In music and women, apparently. As he pulled out of the parking lot, I started my car and headed down the road blasting 'Gimme All Your Lovin' by ZZ Top. I noticed Billy looked up in his rearview mirror and smirk at my music choice. I flipped him the bird in response.

As we both pulled out of the lot I noticed that I drove as fast as Billy did. I had narrowly avoided a few speeding tickets back in Florida. We didn't end up going down the road together for long. I continued straight down the main road as Billy turned onto one of the side roads. According to Nancy, it wasn't the poor part of town but it wasn't as well-off as the part of town we lived in. I found myself mildly curious to know what his home life was like. Hell, I wanted to know who the girl was. She didn't look anything like Billy but she appeared to be his sister.

As much as I wanted to ask Billy who the little red-headed girl was, I'd gotten the sense from him and that he didn't like to talk about her. I hadn't even seen them exchange a single word while they were together. If I had to guess, I would have assumed that the girl was Billy's stepsister. That would have explained the ride-sharing situation but the complete differences in appearances. Perhaps if Billy didn't forget about me by the morning and we ended up growing a little closer, I would man up and ask him who she was.

The majority of my first day at Hawkins High School had been extremely boring. Most of the students at school were the kind of people I had expected to meet. I noticed that the school had a large jock population so I wasn't surprised at all that the first person to ask me out was a football player - the first formal person to ask me out, at least. Steve and Nancy's friends were aggravating and made it no secret that they didn't like me. It felt like the only real friends I had made today were the two of them.

The people that I had sat with at lunch were mainly Steve's friends. They hadn't tried to hide that they weren't happy that I had gotten the most interest from Billy today, but I was certain that he would have moved on from me by tomorrow. Ally was one of Steve and Nancy's nicer friends that I had met. Carol hated me. Nicole, Tina,

and Vickie didn't seem to like me either as I had teased them over Billy's lack of interest in them. I assumed that they weren't used to competition. They must not have been used to girls who were as outspoken as I was.

Throughout the day, I had realized that the boys were no better than the girls. They had leered at me all day. I didn't mind guys looking at me. The thing that bothered me was that they leered but didn't say anything. The reason I liked Billy was that he was bold enough to talk to me and openly express his interest. It was better than the boys who asked me questions about my life and pretended to be interested in what I had to say. It had happened throughout the day. I would have rather they just been direct. I might have said yes if they had been.

My classes were pathetic and most of my teachers didn't care much for me. In most of my classes, it felt like I knew more about the material than the teachers did. They never answered me whenever I raised my hand and many of them didn't seem to believe that I was rightfully enrolled in their classes. My physics and calculus teachers had both called the office to make sure I had gotten my schedule correct, which had been mortifying. I knew that they didn't like having women in their classes and they weren't used to it.

The most entertaining portion of my day was meeting Billy Hargrove. I found myself thinking about him at random intervals throughout the day. When I had gotten bored in my classes, my thoughts would drift off to the way he was bold enough to lay his hands on me without approval. I would imagine the way he would lay his hands all over me had I not shut down his offer. I had looked forward to the moments that we had seen and spoken to each other during the day. Those were the moments where I felt a little bit like my old self.

The real question was what I would do about my budding interest in Billy. I wasn't expecting to find someone I liked at Hawkins High School so quickly. It was surprising to me that I found more than Billy's looks attractive. I liked his personality. Most of the boyfriends I'd had in the past began with a teasing relationship, but none of them had been as forward with me as Billy had. I had a feeling that I would give into Billy someday, exactly as he'd said I would, but I wanted to try and put it off as long as possible.

As I pulled into my driveway, I noticed that my parents' car was there. They must not have gone out today. I figured they had come back so they could grill me about my first day as soon as I'd gotten home. I saw that Nancy was out in her driveway with her family's mail in her hands. I pulled into the driveway and shut off my engine. I climbed out of the car and smiled at Nancy, who looked very eager to get my honest assessment of Hawkins High School. I puffed on my cigarette as I walked over to my friend.

"Well, your friends are lovely," I teased Nancy.

She rolled her eyes. "They're not my friends as much as they're Steve's," Nancy said.

"You put up with them just because he likes them," I inferred.

It was always tough trying to get along with a significant other's friends. "Pretty much," Nancy agreed. "I don't know, last year I cared so much about being with Steve and getting along with all of his friends but then I lost Barb and things kind of..."

"Shifted?" I reasoned. I knew the feeling. Nancy nodded sadly. "You got some perspective on what's important."

"Yeah," Nancy muttered.

After a brief silence, I said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," Nancy said.

"Do you love Steve?" I blurted out.

The question had been on my mind all day. It wasn't my business but I was curious about what their relationship was really like. Nancy's eyes widened to the size of saucers. I knew that I had struck a nerve. "What? I - I mean..." Nancy stammered dumbly. I noticed that she wasn't denying it. Nancy hesitated for longer than she likely realized. "Yeah, of course. I love Steve, I do."

She was nodding so quickly that I thought she would give herself whiplash. "Are you trying to convince me or you?" I asked Nancy. I could see her eyes watering at my question so I swallowed my pride

and backed away from my curiosity. "I'm sorry, Nance." Her mouth twitched up slightly at the nickname. "I'm not trying to be pushy and you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Just know that I like Steve more than almost anyone else I've met in Hawkins, but whatever you tell me stays between us."

Nancy took a deep breath. I figured that she had never expressed her true feelings for Steve to anyone. "Steve was completely different last year. He was the popular guy and a real jerk sometimes," Nancy admitted. I'd figured he must have been an asshole at some point considering so many people called him 'King Steve.' "But he started to like me and I... I don't know. I guess I felt -"

"Excited? Wanted?" I asked, smiling at her.

Nancy laughed. "Yeah." I nodded at her. I knew the feeling, especially after meeting Billy Hargrove. "But at the same time Steve and I were growing closer, I was growing closer with my brother Mike's friend Will's older brother," Nancy continued.

"Is that the guy I saw you with earlier?" I asked.

A few times in the day I had noticed Nancy speaking with another boy in our year. She was the only person I had seen speak to him. "Yeah. His name's Jonathan," Nancy explained.

"You want some honest advice?" I offered.

Nancy laughed, shaking her head. "No, but I think I could use it."

It was my turn to laugh. "You look like you like Steve, Nancy. When the two of you are together, you seem happy. He's got this look on his face when he talks to you like you're the only person in the world, but you look at him no differently than you're looking at me right now," I told her. Nancy's eyes softened at the realization. I felt bad for saying it, but I knew Nancy was already thinking it. She knew that if I saw it, Steve had too. "You deserve to have someone look at you the way Steve does, and he deserves to have someone look that way back at him."

Nancy was silent for a long time before eventually nodding. "He

does," she muttered.

"Don't be afraid of things not working out with Jonathan keep you from doing what you should. I know that you care for Steve. If you care for him as much as I think you do, you'll let him go," I whispered.

Jonathan deserved a fair shot with Nancy and Steve deserved someone who loved him as much as he loved them. "You know, that's probably the most sound advice anyone's given me about them," Nancy admitted.

"I'm not here to judge. I've done some fairly questionable things in my short life," I told her.

Nancy laughed. "Thank you for not judging."

Who was I to judge someone for what they had done with the opposite gender? I was bad enough. "Never. I'm the last person to judge a woman for what she does with the men in her life," I said, chuckling.

All of my actions with the opposite gender were a little embarrassing. "Speaking of the men in someone's life..." Nancy said, her voice going from sad to excited. I threw my head back and groaned as Nancy laughed again. I knew that she would eventually ask about my interactions with the male population of Hawkins High School. She had thrown me curious glances whenever she had seen me with a new guy. "I don't think I've ever seen the male population of Hawkins High School latch so quickly to someone."

"I am not interested," I snapped.

"In any of them?" Nancy asked slowly. I knew she didn't believe that I wasn't interested in Billy. I shrugged. Maybe I had been interested in one of them. "I overheard Mark ask you to come to the football game."

"He did," I answered.

"Are you planning on going?" Nancy asked.

"Are you? I don't want to go by myself," I admitted.

"Maybe. Steve will probably want to go," Nancy said.

Football games weren't something I had ever been interested in; they had always seemed boring and a little too high school for me. "I'm not sure if I'll go. Football isn't my thing. I'm more of the kind of person to go skinny-dipping in an abandoned lake at midnight to celebrate making it through the first week of a new school," I admitted, smirking at her.

Nancy laughed loudly this time. "I can think of someone who would happily join you." I groaned again. If there was one guy I'd known Nancy wanted to ask me about, it was Billy Hargrove. I had known that she would eventually bring the conversation around to him. "I saw Billy Hargrove talking with about ninety percent of the student body today, but I didn't see him speak to anyone as much as he spoke to you," Nancy pointed out.

"He's not the kind of guy who's used to getting turned down. I think this time he likes the chase," I pointed out.

"He asked you out?" Nancy asked.

A vague grin spread over my face. "In a way about as close to asking me out as Billy can get, I think. He's not a movie-and-a-nice-dinner kind of guy, Nancy," I told her.

"Well, do you like him?" Nancy asked.

The words echoed around in my head for a few seconds. Like him? I liked the way he looked. "I don't know him," I told her. I wouldn't tell her, but I did know Billy. At least, I knew more about him than he probably thought anyone in school did. "From what I've seen, Billy Hargrove is the kind of guy that I would always go for."

"So?" Nancy asked.

"That's the exact reason that I plan on staying far away from him," I answered.

I'd decided before coming to Indiana that I had to stop going after

guys who were normally my type. Those relationships never ended well. I needed someone who was sweet and caring, not hot and intense. "I don't know Billy at all, but I have gotten to know you pretty well over the last week. When a girl's got that look in her eyes talking about a guy, it's only a matter of time before they come together," Nancy pointed out.

Of course. Nancy knew as well as Billy and I both did that we would eventually come together. I rolled my eyes irritably. "I'm not giving into Billy Hargrove," I growled.

But Nancy believed me as much as Billy did. "So, that's what this is going to turn into," Nancy said knowingly. I arched an eyebrow in confusion. "It's not that you're not attracted to Billy, it's just that you don't want to give him what he wants."

"Not without him making a little effort," I admitted. "He's the kind of guy that has girls chase him wherever he goes. It might do his ego a little good to try and chase a girl for once."

"But you're not opposed to him?" Nancy asked.

Being with Billy Hargrove would likely be the best time of my short life. "Opposed to being with him? Hell, I'll be dreaming about it," I said. We both laughed as I covered my face in embarrassment. "What about you? What do you think of Billy Hargrove?"

"I think he's not my type," Nancy said.

I looked her up and down teasingly. "Honey, I don't think you're his type either," I said.

"Hey!" Nancy barked. We laughed again as I shook my head at her. Billy wanted someone way more outgoing than Nancy was. She would have never gone for someone as bold as he was either. "I've..."

"You've...?" I trailed off, knowing that Nancy didn't need to hear me repeat her choice. We exchanged a bashful smile as I hummed under her breath. I had wanted to ask while we were hanging out in the week before school started but I wasn't sure if Nancy had trusted me enough to discuss those kinds of things. "Steve or Jonathan?" I asked

quietly.

"Steve," Nancy admitted.

She didn't sound as happy about it as she should have. "Ah. Nance, don't feel bad if you're curious about Jonathan. I didn't speak to him today but every time I saw him, his eyes were on you," I told her honestly.

He had been very quiet but he had spoken volumes by the way he was looking at Nancy. She gave a dumb grin to the floor. "What about you?" Nancy asked.

Now that wasn't a memory I wanted to return to. "Yes. The full story though, that's a little more complicated," I chuckled.

"Complicated?" Nancy asked.

"Nancy!" Mrs. Wheeler shouted from her front porch. "We're getting ready for dinner!"

"Coming, Mom!" Nancy yelled back to her mother as she turned back to me. She gave me a pointed look. "We're not done with this discussion."

I laughed, shaking my head at her. "Goodnight, Nancy. I'll see you at school tomorrow," I said.

"Night, Rachel," Nancy said.

The two of us exchanged a quick hug before turning to our respective homes. I let out a deep breath as I walked away from Nancy, not quite certain how I felt about my first day at Hawkins High School. Part of it was thrilling and other parts were as bad as I had expected them to be. I didn't know which part I felt stronger about. I walked into my living room trying to plaster a smile on my face. No one else needed to know about my rather off day. My father was sitting in front of the television, watching the nightly news and my mother was setting the dinner table.

"Honey!" Mom yelled, noticing me enter. "How was school?"

"School was school," I said noncommittally.

"Were the kids nice?" Dad asked.

"No," I answered.

"Did you make any new friends?" Mom asked.

They looked surprised that I was so emotionless about my first day. I thought about it for a moment before nodding and saying, "Yes."

"What?" Dad asked.

"You went to high school once upon a time, right?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. I gave my father a pointed look, waiting for him to catch on. He stood at me for a moment before shrugging and finally understanding in nodding. "Okay. Point made."

"I'm going to get changed," I told them.

"We want to hear everything!" Mom yelled after me.

"I know," I called back.

What could I tell them about my day? Not anything about Billy, the only interesting thing about my day. I wandered upstairs and dropped my bag and the rest of my things onto my floor. One of my faults was that I couldn't seem to keep my room clean for more than a few days. I chucked my car keys, sunglasses, lighter, and cigarette pack onto my nightstand and headed into my bathroom. I wiped off my makeup and quickly rinsed off my face. I tied my hair up and walked back into my bedroom, getting changed into my pajamas - a pair of shorts and an Aerosmith t-shirt.

Once I had finished getting ready for bed, I unpacked my bag and laid my books out on my bed. Since I had nothing else to do tonight, I figured that I may as well read the syllabus' for my class and get started on my homework. Unfortunately, that was perhaps the lamest way I could spend the night after my first day of school... For a brief moment, I wished that I would have taken up one of the boys on their offers of dinner or a movie. Or, even better, maybe Billy on his night of studying.

A few minutes later I headed back downstairs and sat down with my parents for dinner. The three of us discussed our days with as little detail as possible. My father told me about the work he had done all day. He had started working in an office downtown. He seemed happy enough to be working in engineering again but I could tell that he missed his old coworkers and office. My mother seemed to have enjoyed a day with the other women in the neighborhood, but I knew that she missed our old neighbors.

My parents asked me many questions about my first day at school. I tried to be as vague as possible with my answers. I was positive that they wouldn't want to hear about my relationships with the opposite gender and that was the only interaction I'd had today that had interested me. I mentioned my classes and that Nancy and Steve had hung around me for most of the day. They didn't seem convinced that I was telling them the entire truth, but I didn't care. I wasn't telling me everything about my day.

It did surprise me when my mother asked if there had been any attractive boys around. I could tell by the look on my father's face that he didn't want to hear about it. My face burned with embarrassment as I denied that any guys had been interesting. My father seemed relieved to hear that but my mother didn't seem to believe me. I was very careful to avoid mentioning Billy. I knew that my parents wouldn't like the way he was speaking to me, though I was sure Billy would know how to put on a good act for them.

We finished our dinner and casual chats about our days as I began helping with the dishes, laughing, and joking with my parents. They were teasing me about seemingly everything under the sun. They didn't seem convinced that none of the guys in Hawkins High School had been interested in asking me out. I had rolled my eyes, barking at them to drop it while repeating that I wasn't interested in the guys I went to school with. I pointedly ignored my father telling me that I wasn't old enough to date.

It was off the table to tell my father about my previous dating life, then. I rolled my eyes at him. I had been dating guys back in Florida since I was fourteen and had been intimate with guys for a little over a year. Not that my parents needed to know that last bit. I had insisted to my parents that every time I had seen my boyfriends in

the past had been in public or groups. I had a bad feeling that Billy Hargrove was going to do everything in his power to change that. With how obvious he was, my parents were sure to find out about him eventually.

Once I had finished helping with the dishes, I turned back and threw my head back toward the stairs. "I'm going to call Casey," I told my parents.

"Give her our love," Mom said.

"Yeah, I will," I told them.

They loved and missed Casey and her family as much as I did. My mother and father each smiled at me and I planted kisses on their cheeks before leaving. I needed to go upstairs and get some peace from the day. I headed upstairs and sat cross-legged on the bed, grabbing my phone and dialing Casey's number. I twirled the phone cord in my hand as I waited for Casey to pick up the phone. Despite the time difference, I knew that my best friend would have gotten home from my old high school recently.

"Hello?" Casey's voice called.

"Hey, Case," I greeted happily.

"Rachel!" Casey yelled in response. "How was the first day?"

"It was all right. It turns out that I'm not the only new kid," I said.

"Really?" Casey asked, sounding surprised.

"Yeah. There's another new guy in my year named Billy. He moved here from California," I explained.

"Well, at least someone knows how you feel."

"I suppose."

We remained in silence for a moment as I thought about Casey's reaction to Billy; she was always more attracted to jocks but even she would have admitted that Billy Hargrove was particularly attractive.

"There was a smile your voice when you said his name was Billy," Casey said, and I knew a shit-eating grin was on her face.

"Jesus, Case, don't read into things," I groaned.

Casey's voice adopted a sing-song tone. "Rachel. Is he hot?"

"Smoking," I admitted.

Casey barked out a laugh. She always knew when I was attracted to someone. She didn't even need to see me. "I knew you would meet a hot guy out there! Indiana can't be that lame," Casey said, laughing excitedly.

"Don't get too excited, Case. I'm not the only girl who noticed and he's well aware of the attention he drew," I told her.

Casey hummed understandingly. "One of those guys."

"One of those, indeed. But he fits the bill. He pretty much flat-out propositioned me," I said.

"Did you take him up on his offer?" Casey asked.

"No!" I barked.

"Why not? He's hot, apparently, and you're bored," Casey countered.

"Not that bored," I said.

We both knew that was a lie. I was that bored and I would have been more than happy to entertain myself with Billy. "Oh, come on, Rachel! You were always the person I gossiped with and I don't have anyone to gossip with now that you're gone. Please, I need to live vicariously through you!" Casey groaned theatrically.

"Knock it off!" I snapped. "You've got James to keep you entertained."

"No news there yet," Casey said plainly. "Tell me about this Billy guy."

It wasn't surprising that Casey didn't want to let the conversation about Billy drop. I snorted under my breath and rolled my eyes. I

knew that she'd always been a little nervous to push things forward with James. She thought that James didn't like her the way she liked him, though I knew he did. He had told me that he cared for Casey but had asked me not to step in, so I had minded my business, even though it killed me to stay out of it. I spent the next fifteen minutes repeating the details of each of my encounters with Billy to Casey, who didn't interrupt until I had finished.

"Wow..." Casey breathed.

Was she kidding? She was supposed to be my best friend and that was all she could say about my newest encounter? "Wow? All you have to say is 'wow'? The Casey I know never shuts up," I told her.

"Rachel, you are aware that he sounds exactly like your type?" Casey asked.

"Yes, Case, and that's exactly why I'm not planning on accepting any of his offers," I snapped in response.

"What's wrong with the guys you've dated?" Casey asked.

"Have you seen the guys I've dated?" I said.

We both knew that the guys I had dated were completely useless and a bit too similar to Billy for my liking. If I wanted someone good for me, he had to be completely different. "What's so wrong with Billy Hargrove?" Casey asked. I remained silent as that was my problem. I didn't know what was wrong being with Billy. "Rachel, he seems like your type, and from what you say he's incredibly attractive. Not to mention he doesn't beat around the bush which we both know you like. What's stopping you?"

"I'm not sure. Case, I just..." I trailed off.

"I get it," Casey said.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"Guys have always given you a ton of attention," Casey said. I rolled my eyes and was about to change the subject when Casey spoke again. "Don't roll your eyes at me, I know you're doing it. You're

pretty, Rachel. You're funny and bold and you found a guy who seems to be the male equivalent of you." There was a laugh in Casey's voice that I scowled at. "So, go for it."

"No way," I snapped.

"Why not?" Casey asked.

"Would it be worth all the trouble?" I shot back.

"You'll never know until you find out," Casey teased.

"I'm not sure how interested he is," I pointed out.

Maybe he was interested today, but that didn't mean that he was going to be interested two weeks from now, or even two days from now. "Are you kidding? I wasn't even at your school today and I know he was trying to lure you into bed," Casey said.

"He did the same thing with a bunch of girls," I told her.

"Any as much as you?" Casey asked knowingly.

I sighed. "It didn't seem like it."

"See? He's going after you."

"I know."

Just like the rest of the students at Hawkins High School, Casey knew that Billy had entertained his interactions with me the most. "He likes you! At least, likes the way you look, which has never been a problem before," Casey pointed out.

"No, I know. I just... I don't know, Case. I'm sick of feeling like all I'm good for is being the flavor of the week," I mumbled.

"We both know you're much more than that," Casey said sweetly.

"But does Billy Hargrove? Probably not," I said, answering my question.

"You never know unless you try," Casey prompted.

"If I try, he'll have gotten exactly what he wanted," I said.

"But you will have, too," Casey pointed out.

Maybe we would both get what we wanted, but would it be worth it? What would it be like to give into Billy Hargrove and then potentially never speak to him again? "Yeah, but he's not the type to keep a girl around. Why would he be?" I asked, the grouchiness in my voice more evident than I'd wanted it to be. "He's hot enough to have his pick. You should have seen the girls, Case. It was like a feeding frenzy."

"But you're the one who caught his eye," Casey explained.

"I'm not going to be the first one to go for it," I snapped.

There was a line of girls waiting to go out with Billy. He didn't need me at the forefront. "You've never cared about casual," Casey commented.

Casey was always good to make you realize your faults, whether or not she meant to. "It's not that I'm against hooking up with him, it's just... I don't know," I muttered stupidly.

"You don't want to feel like you lost," Casey inferred.

"You know me well," I told her, laughing under my breath. "He's hot and funny but that's where our communications end."

There was no way our communications would be anything more. Casey hummed as I gulped down some water. "Because you want them to end there or because you're too stubborn to think he could be interested in anything more than your tits?" she asked.

I spat my water across the room. "Casey!" I shouted, gasping, and trying to wipe away the water.

It was a few minutes before either one of us could calm down enough to keep speaking. "Rachel..." Casey said, her voice softening enough to tell me that she was serious now. It wasn't too often that she got serious about anything "People can surprise you. You never know what could happen if you try to get to know him."

Getting to know him was off of the table. We would never get any chance to be anything more than a brief passing flirtation. "Trust me, Case. By tomorrow morning, Billy Hargrove won't even remember I exist," I said determinedly.

3. Chapter 3

Hawkins had surprised me nonstop in the two weeks I had been here. There were lots of things about the small town that I hadn't been expecting. I hadn't expected the weather to be as nice as it was and I hadn't expected to make some close friends. If there was anything that had genuinely surprised me about Hawkins though, it was that Billy Hargrove hadn't given up his pursuit of me after that first day of school. The idea of me turning down his offers of hookups seemed to have only furthered his drive to get me to accept his offers.

When I had driven into the Hawkins High School parking lot for the second day of school, I had felt a little embarrassed. I'd been positive that if I saw Billy at all, he would completely ignore me. I had ended up being very surprised to see that Billy's car was already in the lot in the same spot he had been in the day before. I had parked in my spot from the day before, three down from his, and had gotten out of my car. He had been leaning against his driver's door, seemingly waiting for me.

Without missing a beat, I had walked to him and continued our teasing relationship from the day prior. His arm had wound its way around my shoulder, showing me early-on what a touchy person he was. Not that it bothered me. Billy had quickly made it a point to mention to me that he hadn't forgotten my name or avoided me. I had made it known that the situation would have been different if I had accepted his proposition of studying. Billy had only responded with a smirk.

Throughout much of the day, Billy had asked me if I would study with him. It became harder and harder to ignore his propositions for studying the longer I heard them. It was everything from 'reading' in the back row of the library to him getting the chance to have a private study session with me, using my body to study anatomy. That offer had gotten quickly shut down with a nasty profanity thrown his way. Billy had laughed and quickly changed his offer to let me use his body. I'd walked away before he could see my blush.

By the end of the day on Wednesday, I was no longer convinced that Billy Hargrove would forget about me, whether or not we had slept

together. Instead, he seemed to have found something in me that he genuinely liked. I decided quickly that I wasn't going to fight whatever relationship we had formed. The parts of the day that I looked forward to the most were the interactions that I would have with Billy. It was why I had spent the majority of my free time with him over the last week.

Something that I hadn't expected to come from my strange relationship with Billy was that he hadn't just been someone for me to tease and mercilessly flirt with, but also a friend. Even Nancy had mentioned to me that I had become extremely close to Billy in the short time we had known each other. Closer than anyone else was with him, according to her. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of hearing me say it, but I knew that I couldn't deny it any longer. Billy Hargrove was my friend.

He had become one of the people I was the closest to in Hawkins. Every morning I pulled into the parking lot in my same spot. Some days Billy would be in his spot three down from mine before me, leaning on his car waiting for me to join him. Other days, I would arrive at Hawkins High School first, sitting on the hood of my car, waiting for him to arrive. We would normally spend a few minutes hanging out in the parking lot, chatting away. I noticed glares being sent my way every morning and I knew exactly why.

Billy wasn't one to hide what he did with his dates after he took them home from school. He liked to throw them in my face whenever he had one. I knew that he was hoping I would get sick of hearing about his dates and eventually take him up on his offer of one. He had already hooked up with two different Hawkins girls and had pointedly avoided them since their dates. The other ones he'd gone out with were annoyed that he didn't want a second date. The girls didn't seem to understand why Billy hung around me so much.

Normally, Billy and I would share a cigarette before heading into school. I would avoid looking at the girls who were glaring at me and the boys' hooded stares. Once we were inside the school, I would typically head off to hang out with Steve and Nancy before the day began as Billy would hang around Tommy and Carol, who seemed to have taken an extreme shining to Billy since he had arrived. I couldn't stand the pair - or the rest of their friends - and I always left

once they came to see Billy.

Billy and I wouldn't see each other much during classes as we didn't have any together, but Billy usually did walk with me toward the lunchroom in the middle of the day where he liked to throw a sleazy platitude toward me. Billy now liked to laugh at my reactions to his flirtations as I rolled my eyes, muttered a profanity, shoved him out of the way as hard as I could, and headed toward my table. Billy tended to sit with Tommy and his friends, whom Steve seemed to be distancing himself from.

So far Hawkins High School wasn't as awful as I had been expecting. That didn't mean that I didn't miss my old friends and classes, though. My favorite class of the day so far was swimming, and that was only because during it I would get to watch Billy play basketball. He had told me the other day that he was planning on joining the basketball team and I could see why. He was very good. I had even admitted to him that he was probably the best player at Hawkins High School, which I could tell had pleased him.

On Wednesday, I and the rest of the female students in swimming had gotten to get in the water for the first time. The whistles from the boys in the gym had told me that they were watching us as closely as we had been watching them. I had made sure to catch Billy's eyes as I had climbed out of the pool, water dripping off of me. I had also made sure to wear the swimsuit that was a size too small. When Billy had caught my eyes, his had looked almost black. I was positive that we both would have been willing to kill someone to have each other at that moment.

It hadn't helped that Billy had been dripping sweat and hadn't been wearing a shirt. My heart had been pounding and I'd never been so tempted to pull someone out of class to have my way with them. I had had to take an ice-cold shower before leaving for the day, something Billy had admitted to me that he had also done (and had made sure to tell me he wished I had been with him). Of course, if I had, we wouldn't have ever gotten out of school. It had been very difficult to look him in the eye after that.

Nancy and I would normally walk out of school together at the end of the day and I would say goodbye to her and Steve, who would drive

Nancy home. Their relationship seemed to be slowly mending itself. I would normally walk out to my car and greet Billy, who was always there waiting. Sometimes he would be waiting on his stepsister to bring her home and other days he would be waiting for me. With one final offer of a date, I would roll my eyes at him one last time and walk off.

As today was the first Saturday at the end of my first week at Hawkins High School, it was the first day I had no plans to see Billy or anyone else. At least, that was unless I wanted to go to the football game, which I still hadn't decided on. Nancy had mentioned that she was probably going to go with Steve, but I had told her that I wasn't sure if I wanted to go. I had meant what I had told Mark on my first day; football wasn't my thing. Though, I didn't want to sit at home alone on another Saturday night either.

It was still early in the morning and I didn't have plans for the day yet. I was in a white tank top with a black-and-white collared shirt and a pair of daisy dukes on my lower half for the day. It was the first time I had dressed like I was living back in Florida since moving to Indiana. It was the first day the weather had been nice enough to wear my old clothes. After a while of hanging around upstairs and doing some homework, I wandered downstairs and smiled at my parents. My father was still fighting with his boombox. It had been broken during the move.

"Can't get it to work, huh?" I asked, walking up behind him.

Dad scowled, throwing his screwdriver onto the table. "No, I think the tuner is broken," Dad growled. "Damn."

"There's an electronics store near the arcade downtown," Mom offered, glancing up from her spot making breakfast in the kitchen. "I saw it when I was picking up groceries the other day."

Dad hummed. "Maybe I'll take a ride out there later."

"I'll go," I offered.

Anything to get out of the house for a little while and do something. I hated being alone with nothing to do. It was nothing like I had been

back in Florida, where I'd always been a social butterfly. "You will?" Dad asked, surprised.

"Sure. I don't have anything better to do," I admitted.

Dad thought about it for a moment before nodding. "Okay. Do you know what you're looking for?" he asked.

"It's a radio tuner, I think I can figure it out," I joked.

Radios weren't my specialty but I could always ask someone in the store if I couldn't find it. "Well, it'll save me the trip," Dad said, nodding at me. "Go for it."

"Do you know where it is?" Mom asked.

"I've seen the arcade before," I said. I had spotted it during one of my outings with Nancy in the week leading up to my first day at school. "I can find it."

"Call if you need anything," Mom said.

"I will. See you guys later!" I yelled.

They both called back their goodbyes as I grabbed my things and headed out the front door. My parents both smiled at me and waved as I walked into the driveway and hopped into my car, revving the engine and backing out of the driveway. I vaguely knew where I was supposed to be going, but I wasn't the best with directions. I knew that the arcade was on the other side of town. I knew that there were two shopping centers around the free-standing arcade but I had never seen the electronics store. I figured and hoped that it wouldn't be too hard to find.

I headed down the main road, soaring way faster than I should have. I tried to think about the places that I was going but I was thinking way too much about Billy Hargrove. He was taking up way too much of my time. Thinking about him and thinking about what I wanted to do with him. I blushed, trying to forget about my ever-growing feelings for Billy Hargrove. I didn't know how I was supposed to handle them. I had never developed feelings for someone as quickly as I had for him.

There were plenty of guys that I had liked back in Florida and some I had dated, but I had never cared for any of them the way that I had grown to care for Billy. He annoyed me and was constantly flirting with me, but I had found quickly that we had become pretty good friends. He had easily become the person that I was the closest to within Hawkins outside of Steve and Nancy. Of course, I didn't flirt with either one of them the way that I flirted with Billy.

Come on, Rachel. Think about something else. I shook my head at myself. I refused to allow myself to keep thinking about Billy. He was on my mind way too much anyway. I pulled up to the arcade and pulled into a spot not far from the entrance. I didn't know where the electronics store was but I knew it couldn't be far. There were two strip malls along the arcade and I figured that it wouldn't take me more than a few minutes to go through them. Maybe if I was lucky I would find it quickly and be able to go back home.

This may have been a way to get out of the house but I wasn't interested in shopping for a radio tuner. I walked to the furthest strip mall from me first. There were five stores that I walked along but I didn't see an electronics store. I saw a grocery store, a discount store, a small bar, a coroner, and a general store instead. I rolled my eyes. I wasn't looking for any of those stores and I didn't feel like walking through the general store to see if they had a radio tuner. Maybe the other strip mall had the electronics store.

I huffed in annoyance as I turned in the other direction and headed toward the second strip mall. I had no better luck with that one than I'd had at the first strip mall. There was nothing in the second one other than a large clothing store, a consignment store, and some empty shops. I scowled as I headed back to my car. I figured I would try one more loop to see if I had missed anything. I couldn't believe that I couldn't find it. Maybe my parents were wrong. Maybe there wasn't an electronics store out here.

My last thought was to try and go back to the arcade and ask someone inside for directions. I headed back toward the arcade and looked around as I walked, but I still didn't see anything resembling an electronics store. I threw my arms up, annoyed that I couldn't find the electronics store, and annoyed that I had come out here for nothing. I should have stayed home and watched television. I was

going to make one last trip around the strip malls before heading back home.

As I walked back and forth, I looked all around, trying to find the electronics store. My parents had told me that it was next to the arcade but I didn't see it. I huffed and prepared to head back home when I saw Billy's car come screaming up. He screeched to a stop and let out the red-headed girl I had learned was his stepsister, Max. Max climbed out of the car and flipped Billy the bird as he peeled out. I chuckled under my breath, watching her head into the arcade. Billy ground to a halt in his car as he passed in front of me.

He rolled down his tinted window, leaning back in his chair to stare at me. I smirked down at him. "Good morning," I greeted teasingly.

Billy smirked. "It is now."

It seemed that my luck for the day was finally changing. I smiled as Billy nodded for me to follow him. He drove to a parking spot and got out, walking over to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. I had noticed lately that he was a very touchy person, but it didn't bother me. I liked that he was touchy. I was too and every time I was around him, I wanted to be even touchier. The two of us leaned up against the hood of the car as I laid my head against Billy's shoulder.

"What are you doing out here?" Billy asked, breaking the silence.

"Looking for an electronics store I can't find," I answered. Billy arched an eyebrow, clearly unsure of what I meant. I giggled under my breath. "My dad's radio tuner is broken and he needs a new one. I offered to go get one although I don't know where the electronics store is, which admittedly wasn't my brightest move." Billy grinned. "What are you doing out here?"

"Taking that little shit to the arcade," Billy said, throwing his head to the doors Max had vanished through.

That was nice. "What a marvelous brother you are," I huffed.

Billy's body tensed as he said, "She's not -"

"Your sister. I know, I know," I said, waving him off.

The angry look on Billy's face wasn't bothering me. I knew him well enough to know that he had a temper, and people with a temper had never bothered me before. I had noticed him snapping at a few people since we'd met. Most had recoiled in fear, but I didn't. If there was one thing I'd noticed, it was that his family normally elicited the angry responses. He never talked about them. He hadn't spoken a word about his family to anyone, though he had said a little bit to me. More than he had to anyone else, at least.

So far I had learned that the little red-headed girl was named Max and that she was his stepsister. I was surprised to learn that Billy had known Max for almost ten years. His attitude toward her had made it seem like they'd met recently. They had moved to Hawkins when Billy's father had married Max's mother. He had told me enough so that I knew his stepmother's name was Susan and that he didn't know her well. It didn't escape me that I was the only person Billy had told anything regarding his family too.

"Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't tell her to skateboard out here herself," I said, shattering the silence after a while.

Billy huffed. "I tried."

Why couldn't he just accept that I was trying to be nice and compliment him? "Well, it was nice of you to bring her here anyway," I said, scowling at him.

Billy huffed again. "It wasn't my choice."

"Accept the damn compliment," I snapped.

Billy grinned at me. "Well, now I have to find something to do for the next hour," he said.

Meaning he was thinking about heading somewhere private with me for an hour. I glared at him. "How about work on your algebra homework? I saw your first quiz grade," I said.

On Thursday he had come out of the school with his first algebra quiz hanging from his hands. It was a 'D.' He hadn't said anything about it

but I had been tempted to bring it up. I knew he was intelligent and could do more than that. Billy whacked me over the shoulder, making me laugh. "I keep asking you to tutor me," Billy pointed out.

"And I always tell you yes," I answered, looking up at him and smirking. We were speaking so closely together that our lips almost brushed. I dropped my voice to speak to him quietly. "I will tutor you at the local library, fully clothed."

"Where's the fun in that? Come on, Rach. We could have a good study session. Hop in the back," Billy said, holding my chin and motioning his head to the backseat. "I'll give you a lesson."

"Wow..." I said quietly, pulling away from him and glancing down at my wristwatch. Billy was staring at me uncomprehendingly. "You made it five minutes without a sleazy platitude. That's a new record, Hargrove." Billy laughed as I gently shoved myself off of him before I took him up on his offer. "Also, I think not. I'll be the one teaching you something."

Billy smirked, extending his hand to the backseat. "Please. Be my guest."

"I am not that easy," I snapped.

Billy grinned. "Wouldn't want you if you were, Winters."

My stomach churned with nerves and excitement as I hopped up onto the hood of Billy's car. I smirked at Billy as he leaned on his arms over me, enclosing my body with his arms. I started up at him for a moment before reaching down and pulling my checkered shirt over my shoulders, leaving me in a thin, white wife-beater. Billy leaned back to look at my chest. I was positive that Billy could see my blue bra through the tank top but I didn't care. It wouldn't be the first bra (or last) he had ever seen. Billy's eyes darkened and his grin widened as he watched me.

Billy smirked, trailing his eyes slowly up my body. "Now that's more like it," Billy said.

"Shut up, Hargrove," I snapped.

Billy's hands landed on my bare thighs as I leaned on my back against the hood. It was warm from the hours it had spent baking in the sun. "The hell are you doing?" Billy asked.

"Sunbathing," I answered simply. "Your car's nice and warm. It reminds me of Florida."

As soon as I had said it, I could feel Billy's fingers working their way up my thighs as his thumbs moved from the outside of my thighs to the inside, so close to where I had wanted them. Goosebumps from his touch rose against my skin. "Cold?" Billy asked knowingly.

"Freezing," I responded numbly.

He knew exactly what the goosebumps were from. He knew what his touch was doing to me. I popped my eyes open long enough to meet his. Billy was leaning over me, squeezing my thighs gently. He was leaning over me so closely that I could feel the heat coming off of his body. I blushed slightly as I leaned up and smirked at him. Our fingers were nearly touching and I felt the blush spread across my chest and cheeks. I desperately wanted to have him, more than I had ever wanted anyone before.

"Are you planning on going to the arcade?" I asked, trying to break my thoughts from imagining what was under Billy's clothes.

Billy huffed. "No, I have a life."

Maybe he normally had a life, but he didn't this morning. Neither one of us did, it seemed. "Which explains why you're out here alone on a Saturday morning instead of rolling out of bed with some chick you don't know," I teased.

"You think so lowly of me," Billy huffed.

"You've given me no reason not to," I replied, smirking at him.

The two of us smiled at each other as I closed my eyes. The sun was beating down warmly on my front as I felt the shift of the car under what I assumed was Billy's weight as he joined me. I smiled as I felt him lay up against me. There was enough room on the wide hood that he would have been able to lay a few feet apart but he was

pressed against me. I smiled, taking his arm and looping it behind my head so that I could lay on him. I smiled as Billy tugged me into him. I looked up at him, so close to his lips that I could have easily kissed him.

"Does Billy Hargrove like cuddling?" I teased.

"If it gets you where I want you," Billy said.

"Where do you want me?" I asked quietly.

My throat went dry at his look. Billy looked down at me, placing one hand on the back of my bare thigh, pulling it over his lap. His mouth was almost against my ear. "Everywhere," he growled.

A massive blush flooded my face and chest. Think about something else, Rachel. "Am I keeping you from something?" I asked.

Billy shook his head. "Not really. I was thinking about hooking up with Tina," he answered bluntly.

A stab of annoyance shot through my chest. I knew that he had said it because he had known it would bother me, and it did. I scowled at him. I knew that Tina was one of the girls Billy had hooked up with over the past week. He knew where Tina lived and had likely brought her back home and hooked up with her there. I hadn't seen Billy talk to her since then and I knew that his comment was an overstatement. It didn't stop the little spike of jealousy that shot through my chest.

"Did the two of you have plans?" I asked.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Billy replied.

It was nice to know that he was as sleazy as I'd thought he was. I laughed, rolling my eyes at him. "You were planning on just going to Tina's house without warning and hooking up with her?" I asked.

"Yep," Billy said bluntly.

I rolled my eyes. "You're a real romantic, Hargrove."

"Romance is for suckers," Billy said.

"True," I admitted begrudgingly.

Billy and I exchanged a quick grin. I could tell that Billy was surprised that I had agreed with him that I didn't believe in romance. I had never seen any romance from any of my old partners. The most they had done was bought me a crappy bracelet or maybe give me cheap plastic flowers. Romance was long-dead. I'd learned to stop expecting it. I knew that my parents loved each other, but I doubted I would ever see anything myself. I didn't even like romance, though I did wonder if Billy was capable of it.

Thinking about being romantic was Billy was annoying. I didn't want to think that he would be romantic with someone else. "You were going to hook up with Tina without giving her any warning?" I asked sharply.

"Yeah," Billy answered. He looked at me, a smirk on his face. "Why? Bothered it's not you?"

"Please, we both know there's no competition," I huffed. Billy laughed at my arrogance. "I'm just surprised that you're planning on hooking up with Tina again."

"Why's that?" Billy asked.

"You're not the kind of guy to keep a girl around once you've gone on a date and gotten what you wanted with her," I said.

"What about you?" Billy asked.

I scowled at him. "We've never been on a date, Hargrove."

"Do you think I would?" Billy asked.

There was no way that we were going to try that route. I didn't want to sleep with him and then have him never speak to me again, though I wasn't going to admit it. "I guess we'll never find out," I said teasingly.

Billy smirked. "Yes, we will."

"Cocky," I chuckled.

"You have no idea," Billy said.

But I would have loved to have an idea. I shook my head clear of my thoughts. I turned on my side to scowl at him as I laid a leg over his lap, moving my knee toward his crotch. A smirk popped up on my lips. "Are you sure about that?" I asked playfully.

Billy placed one of his hands underneath my thigh to hold it against his body. "Come on, Rach. I've got forty minutes left," Billy said. "What do you want to do with them?"

I smirked at him and said, "Not you."

"Come on, Rach," Billy urged. "It could be the best -"

"Three minutes of my life?" I interrupted playfully.

There was no way he would only last for three minutes, but I was going to mess with him. What I wasn't expecting was for Billy to tighten his grip on my tank top and yank me into him. I gasped as he grabbed onto the back of my neck so tightly that it almost hurt. "You can't seriously think I'll only last for three minutes?" Billy asked. My throat went dry as I tried to fight for words. Any coherent thoughts had left my mind. "Winters, you won't be able to walk when I'm done with you."

"Promises, promises," I teased. It would have been a little more impressive had my voice not cracked. Billy smirked as he rolled me onto my back and leaned over me. We were within inches of kissing when I pushed against his chest, suddenly remembering myself. "No, uh-uh, this is not happening."

Billy smirked. "Sure it will."

"And I repeat, go to hell," I snapped playfully.

"Can't get any closer than we are. God, this place is such a shithole," Billy groaned, falling back against the car hood.

"On that matter, we're agreed," I added.

"The second I can, I'm out of here," Billy told me.

"You're planning on going back to California once you graduate?" I asked.

It was the same way I felt. I wanted to be back in Florida after graduation. "Tell me something," Billy said. I nodded for him to continue. "You saw my first quiz grade. Do you think I'm going to make it to graduation?"

Suddenly, I felt extremely bad for teasing him. I hadn't thought that he was that upset with his grades. I hadn't thought he cared at all. "That's not what I meant," I told Billy, rolling onto my hip to meet his eyes. "Hey, it's early on. There's still plenty of times to get your grades up and change things."

Billy huffed. "It's not like I'm college material. I'm better with my hands anyway."

"You don't have to go to college. It's not for everyone," I said. Just because I wanted to go to college didn't mean that everyone else had to do it. "And don't say that. You'll regret not graduating from high school."

"I'm not on track right now," Billy pointed out.

We could both get him back on track. "Tell you what, I'll make you a deal," I said. Billy nodded, looking a little more interested than he had been a moment before. "If you can show me that you're willing to study and get your grades up, I'll tutor you just the way you want." I leaned over Billy, narrowing my gaze playfully. "A private study session with me will come with all the perks."

Billy grinned. "You've got yourself a deal, Winters."

It was perhaps the best deal I had made in a long time. I smiled as Billy moved back from me a bit and extended his hand. I took his hand in my grasp and shook it. His hands were softer than I had expected but rough enough to indicate that he frequently used his hands. I blushed slightly as Billy placed his spare hand over our linked ones. We remained linked together for about a minute before releasing each other. I moved back to lay against Billy's shoulder and pressed a hand over his chest.

"Tell me something," I said, desperate to change the topic.

"What?" Billy asked.

"Tell me what California was like," I said.

Billy laughed. "Better than this shithole."

"Come on!" I urged, smacking Billy on the chest. "What do you miss the most?"

Billy thought on it for a few moments before saying, "Chicks walking around in bikinis all the time."

"Go to hell," I barked.

"We're already here, Winters," Billy teased.

Billy was such an ass. He knew exactly how to get to me. I laughed at him as I smacked his chest again. "I hear that. Come on. Tell me what you miss the most about California," I said, gently nudging his shoulder. "I'll repay the favor."

"Surfing," Billy answered.

His honest answer shocked me. "Really?" I asked dumbly. Billy nodded. "I didn't peg you for a surfer."

"Oh, yeah. I was out on the waves every day," Billy said.

He struck me as the type to ride motorcycles on the backroads, not surfing at the California beaches. "I've always wanted to learn how to surf," I said honestly. It was one skill I'd always wanted to learn. "I tried to surf a few times in Florida but they're better for bodysurfing. The waves usually don't get much bigger than three feet."

Billy laughed. "That's pathetic."

"Shut up!" I said, laughing as I shoved Billy's shoulder. "We have the most beautiful beaches in the world but the waves leave something to be desired. What's surfing like?"

"It's the best feeling in the world," Billy said quickly. I smiled at the dreamlike tone on his voice. It was the kindest I'd ever heard him. "The feeling of being on top of the waves is like you're on top of the world. There's nothing else to worry about. The water hitting your face and feeling like you're flying. Being on top of a wave... there's nothing like it."

His voice was unlike I had ever heard it before. He sounded happier than I would have thought he could be. It made me smile. "I think we finally found something that Billy Hargrove loves," I said. Billy chuckled as I turned on my hips to face him. "Where did you surf?"

"The Lower Trestles," Billy answered. I hummed under my breath. That meant that he was from somewhere near San Diego. "Have you ever heard of them?"

"Yeah. I had a friend who was an avid surfer and he always wanted to go there," I said.

My friend Adam had always loved surfing and had been determined to go to some of the best spots for waves all over the world. The Lower Trestles were one of the American surfing spots he'd wanted to go to. "The waves there are some of the best in the world. You'll never have a bad surfing day," Billy said dreamily. I smiled at him. The way he was speaking made me want to go surfing. "They're not like the waves at Mavericks but those waves get up to sixty feet."

"That's crazy. I can't imagine it," I told Billy.

Sixty foot waves sounded like they would crush you to death. "I always wanted to go surfing out there," Billy said.

"Maybe you'll get to go one day," I told him. Billy smiled at me. "Do you know any tricks?"

Billy nodded. "Yeah."

"Tell me about them," I goaded.

So, Billy spent some time telling me about the surfing tricks he knew. He knew all of the beginning tricks like the bottom turn, carve, and cutback. He knew some of the intermediate tricks like the snap,

roundhouse cutback, off-the-lip, foam climb, switch stance, kick-flip, three-sixty, nose riding, tail slide, and closeout re-entry. He was apparently in the middle of learning how to do a proper tube ride when his family had moved to Hawkins. I wished that I could have seen him surf.

It was relaxing listening to the way Billy was talking about his surfing passion. He mentioned he had once wanted to go professional but had quickly realized that he was good, but wasn't that good. He mentioned that it had taken him almost a week to learn how to stand up on the board, though he had been a little kid when he had first learned. It had taken him nearly two months to become decent with regularly standing upright. He mentioned that his hardest skill was the tube ride and that he still hadn't learned a proper exit.

Listening to him talk gave me a massive itch to get back to the beach. "God, I miss the water," I groaned, pressing my head back against the car hood. "It's the one thing I miss most about Florida."

"You could always go to the community pool," Billy suggested.

That was the most disgusting suggestion I had ever heard. There was no way I was going to the community pool. "That little kids piss in? I'm good," I snapped. Billy laughed at the disgust in my voice. "No, I miss the feeling of the sand in between your toes. I've always wanted to learn how to surf. My friend was going to teach me but never got the chance."

"I could teach you," Billy offered.

"I wasn't aware there were many beaches in Hawkins," I deadpanned.

"Go to hell," Billy snapped.

"We're already there, Hargrove," I teased.

Billy smirked. "There's always Indiana Dunes."

Indiana Dunes was on the other end of the state. The drive there would take forever and I wasn't going alone. "Oh, and it's only a short four-hour car ride away," I snapped.

Billy laughed as he placed his hand on my thigh. "I could find a way to keep you entertained."

"Oh, I'm sure you could. But we both know we'd never make it to the beach," I reasoned.

"And that's such a bad thing?" Billy asked. I couldn't come up with an answer. "Come on, Rach. We've got twenty minutes left."

There was no way I was doing what I wanted to do with Billy for only twenty minutes. I needed way longer than that and I wanted him to know it. "Hargrove, you're going to need a lot longer than twenty minutes," I told him. I leaned over Billy's body, speaking so close that our lips nearly brushed. "Unless you don't think you can last."

Billy stared at me for a moment with dark eyes, digging his fingers into my thighs so hard that I was certain they would bruise. "Winters, you'll be begging for it to end," Billy teased.

"I'm not a quitter," I shot back.

Maybe I'd be begging to finish, but that it. Billy's eyes brightened. "Where have you been all my life?" he asked.

My heart fluttered slightly. I laughed at his comment but stared at him for a moment. I was positive that if the two of us hooked up, it would be a long night filled with no sleep. It was what would come afterward that concerned me. I hated to admit it but I was nervous that if we hooked up, Billy wouldn't want me afterward. He had become a good friend to me lately. It was something that I couldn't deny any longer. Billy Hargrove was my friend and losing him once we had hooked up would hurt me.

I'd never been so relieved that Billy changed the subject afterward. The two of us spent much of our remaining time together discussing life and what our respective homes had been like. I told Billy all about what my old school had been like. I told him about the beach that had been so close to the school I'd gone to. I talked about how my friends and I would go out to the beach first thing in the morning and then run to school, still soaking wet, afraid that we would miss

the first bell. Billy laughed at my story.

Afterward, I told Billy about my childhood, excluding the fact that I had been adopted. I hadn't let anyone know about my adoption yet and I wasn't going to tell them unless I felt comfortable enough to do it. Instead, I told Billy about my parents and what they were like. I told him that my mother was a wonderful cook and had been a nurse until I was born. I told him that my father loved to embarrass me and was an engineer. I mentioned that we all missed our home in Florida.

If there was one thing I noticed, it was that as much as I talked about my old life and my family dynamics, Billy didn't tell me much about his life in California. I didn't get much more out of him than what I had already known except that the Mayfield's had been in his life for a long time, though he had never accepted them as family, and that his father's name was Neil. Otherwise, he told me nothing new. I knew that he wasn't comfortable enough to tell me anything else about his family life that wasn't very good.

That was one of the things I had been curious about. From the moment I had met Billy, I had wondered if his home life wasn't good. I had figured that it must not have been. He was constantly out of his house or looking for ways to keep himself entertained. Plus, he never spoke about his family. It had taken me a week just to get their names out of him. If he had had a good relationship with any of his family members, he would have dropped Max off at the arcade, gone back home to do something for an hour, and then come back to grab her.

Billy did speak a little bit about his friends, but he didn't seem to miss them as much as I missed mine. I loved hearing Billy talk about the waves. That was what he spent most of his time with me talking about. It was sweet. It was the thing he had the most passion for in the world. I wanted to see him surfing. I wanted to see what the real Billy was like. I wanted to see him with his walls down. Of course, that would also mean that I would have to take my walls down.

"Can I ask you something?" Billy said, breaking my train of thoughts.

"Sure," I said.

"Why did you move from Florida?" Billy asked.

My face drained of color. That wasn't a story I ever wanted to tell. "Oh, it's kind of a long and complicated story," I muttered stupidly.

Billy arched a blonde eyebrow. "Long and complicated? I thought you just moved because your father got a new job here?" he asked knowingly.

My jaws flapped open and closed for a minute. I had almost forgotten that I had told everyone the reason we had moved was that my father had gotten a new job in Hawkins. "Why the hell did you ask if you already knew?" I snapped irritably.

"Because I knew you were lying," Billy teased.

"How?" I barked.

"Your eyes don't match your mouth when you tell people that story," Billy said.

I huffed in annoyance. "Aren't you clever?"

Billy smirked. "I won't ask."

"Really?"

"We've all got secrets."

His secrets must have been fascinating. "Want to tell me one of yours?" I chirped.

"When you tell me the truth about why you moved to Hawkins," Billy said.

The two of us smiled at each other. I laid in Billy's arms as we exchanged a quick look. It was nice to see that Billy wasn't a complete ass. The two of us chattered quietly as we sunbathed. I wished that our time together would never end. I knew that I was getting into dangerous territory with Billy. We weren't just hanging out together and flirting. Some real feelings, at least on my part, were starting to get themselves involved. I didn't know what I was

supposed to do about them.

It would have been smart to step back and say 'goodbye,' but I couldn't stop myself as I asked, "Are you going to the game tonight?"

Billy snorted under his breath. "It's not my kind of thing."

"What is your kind of thing?" I asked.

Billy thought about it for a moment before saying, "Rolling out of bed with some chick I don't know."

I laughed under my breath. "I guess I had that one coming."

Billy chuckled. "Oh, that's not all -"

I jumped up and slapped my hand over his mouth. "Do not finish that thought," I snapped.

"Don't be a prude," Billy huffed.

I'd been called many names before but no one had ever called me a prude. "Did you just call me a prude?" I barked. Billy smirked at me as I jammed my finger in his sternum. "Spend a night with me, Hargrove. That's the last thing you'll be calling me."

Billy smirked again. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

The two of us smirked at each other again. Billy and I both knew that we were going to hook up one day. It wouldn't be long with the way we were going. I had never had the best impulse control in the world and it was at its lowest when it came to hot guys. I noticed that Billy was moving into me but I was doing nothing to stop it. Not when he ran his hand underneath my shirt and not when I began moving toward his mouth. We were centimeters away from each other when I remembered myself.

Instead of giving in to my base desire and kissing him, I stole the glasses from Billy's face and propped them on my face. "What the hell are you doing?" Billy asked, chuckling as I raised my eyebrow underneath his frames.

"They look much better on me," I teased.

"They'd look better off. So would everything else," Billy said, leaning over me again.

His hands were moving up my bare back, pulling me into him. My heart skipped a beat as my stomach churned with nerves. I glanced down at my wristwatch and sighed. "Your hour's up," I commented.

It was like talking to a wall. I was being pushed down by Billy onto the hood of his car. We were so close together but I knew that it wasn't the right time. I didn't want to be another notch in Billy Hargrove's bedpost. I refused to be. So, I slipped out from underneath Billy's arms as my boots hit the pavement. Billy laughed as I straightened up and tossed my hair behind my shoulders confidently. Billy pushed himself off of the car and came to stand in front of me, pushing me back against the door.

It was good to know that Billy didn't let me walk away when he knew I didn't want to. "Come on, Rach. You know you want it," Billy said, pressing his hands against the doorframe of his car, trapping me between his arms. I saw a flash of red beside us, indicating that Max had returned from the arcade. "All you have to do is ask nicely."

"Hargrove, you will never hear me ask for it," I snapped unconvincingly.

"I don't need to hear you ask for it," Billy said. He was acting like he hadn't even seen Max arrive. He probably didn't care. I arched an eyebrow as Billy moved his face to my throat and up to my ear. "I want to hear you beg for it."

"Okay," I whispered, feeling my toes curl. We could talk about that later when a little kid wasn't present. I waited for Billy to move now that Max had arrived, but it didn't look like he was going to. He didn't care that his stepsister was watching us half-hookup mere inches from her. Max huffed in disgust as I turned to her with a vague smile. "Hey, Max."

The little red-headed girl looked up at me in shock. "Hi, Rachel," Max replied after a moment.

Billy unlocked the door so that Max could get in. Max jumped inside and slammed the door behind her. In the meantime, I looked at Billy and raised an eyebrow. I was positive that I had never said my name in front of Max. "How does she know my name?" I asked Billy, raising an eyebrow curiously.

"The little shit eavesdrops," Billy huffed.

"On?" I asked.

"I'd be happy to give you a full play-by-play," Billy said, smirking.

Nope. We weren't going there. Not right now. I smirked, resting a hand on Billy's belt buckle and tugging gently. I placed my other hand on his chest, underneath his unbuttoned shirt, gently moving it down. My lips tilted upward as I felt Billy's chest muscles tightening under my touch. "See you on Monday," I whispered to Billy.

"Bye, Rach," Billy replied.

My heart skipped a beat as I leaned up and took Billy's chin in my hand. The two of us smiled at each other as I pressed a long kiss against Billy's cheek. I stayed against him for much longer than I had meant to. It was almost a full minute before I pulled back and released him. Billy laid a hand against my waist for a moment before releasing me. I walked back to my car and hopped in, starting the engine. 'What's Love Got to Do with It' by Tina Turner played. I hated the song but was too wrapped up in thoughts of Billy to care.

I followed Billy out of the parking lot for a few seconds. I could see him glance in the rearview mirror to wink at me. I raised my right hand and flipped him the bird. Billy laughed as I turned after him. We were both driving in the same direction, flooring it for a few minutes before Billy turned down a side road. It wasn't the poor part of the town but it wasn't as nice as the part of town I lived in. I briefly wondered what his house was like as I headed to my house, still completely wrapped up in thoughts of Billy.

Constantly thinking about him was driving me out of my mind. He seemed to be the only person I could think about lately. I hated how much my thoughts rested on Billy. I hated the stupid grin that was on

my face because of him as I drove home. I arrived in my driveway within a few minutes, thrilled to be back so I didn't have to think of Billy-fucking-Hargrove. I walked in the front door of my house, still feeling a little drunk off of my morning with him. My parents were in the living room, clearly waiting for me.

"What happened to twenty minutes?" Dad snapped, looking very angry.

A smile tilted up on my lips as I laughed guiltily. "I got a little sidetracked," I muttered dumbly.

My parents knew that I hadn't been sidetracked by a store or shopping. They must have known that it was a person - and a guy, at that. My father narrowed his eyes as he watched me walk into the living room. "You don't look like you have my tuner," Dad commented.

"I said I got sidetracked," I said, feeling the blush rise on my cheeks. He was still scowling at me. "Sorry, I'll get it tomorrow."

"What did you get sidetracked by?" Dad asked.

A guy who wants to get in your daughter's pants. I stammered over my words for a moment before my mother spoke. "It's not a 'what'. It's a 'who,'" she said knowingly, giving me a scrutinizing stare.

"Who?" Dad asked sharply.

"Mom!" I barked.

"What are you two talking about?" Dad asked.

We were not about to talk about my semi-relationship with Billy. They didn't need to know what I said to guys when they weren't around. "Don't think I don't notice you dressing to impress since your first day. You went out with a long-sleeved shirt on and came home mysteriously without it," Mom said, chuckling as I hiked my tank top up higher on my chest.

Marvelous. Dad was going to kill me for that. "What?" Dad howled.

"Mother!" I barked, my face going as red as a tomato. "Enough! It's... hot outside."

"What are you two talking about?" Dad asked, obviously annoyed that he was being left out of the loop.

"Nothing!" I yelled, desperate to break the conversation. Mom was holding a hand over her mouth to try and keep from laughing as I tried to find the right words. "I went to the arcade and couldn't find the electronics store. I'll go out and get the tuner tomorrow."

"Where did your shirt go?" Dad asked.

"Can we drop it, please?" I muttered desperately.

"Who's this friend of yours?" Dad asked.

My face burned pathetically as I remembered the conversation between Billy and myself. "Oh, come on. It doesn't matter," I said, waving off his concern.

Mom walked up behind me, brushing my long hair over my shoulder. "Well, we would love to meet him when you decide it's time," she told me.

My head snapped up to meet her eyes. "I didn't say it was a guy," I said.

She smiled down at me. "You didn't have to."

Was it that obvious that there was a guy I was into? I supposed I had never reacted this way to a guy before. Maybe that was how she knew and how she knew that it was something at least kind of special. "I'm going to get some fresh air," I said, trying to take a deep breath as I headed back to the front door. "I'll be back."

"Good. You look like you could use it," Mom joked.

She was laughing at me as I walked outside to get some fresh air. It was what I needed after feeling so overwhelmed by my conversation with Billy. I walked outside and took a deep breath, wandering further into the front yard. I didn't know if I needed fresh air or a

cold shower "Uh-oh. You've got that stupid smile on your face that only comes from a good conversation with a boy," Nancy's voice called. I glanced over at my neighbor and smiled dumbly. "Let me guess. Billy?"

"Who else would it be?" I groaned.

Nancy smiled as she walked up to my side. "What happened? I saw you leave this morning."

"I went to find the electronics store. My parents told me it was by the arcade," I began.

"It's downtown," Nancy interrupted.

"Yeah, I know that now," I huffed.

"So, what ended up happening?" Nancy asked.

"It was weird, Nance. I was out looking for the electronics store and I ran into Billy. He was dropping his stepsister off at the arcade," I explained when I saw how surprised she looked. "He stopped and we just spent the hour talking and having a good time. I mean, of course, he flirted and I flirted back but we got to talking and it wasn't like he was ignoring me. It felt like he -"

"Heard you?" Nancy interrupted, smiling gently.

"Yeah," I said, my face turning a little red. Talking about my crush on Billy made me feel like a little girl. "Does that seem stupid?" I asked.

"No," Nancy said, shaking her head. "It sounds surprising but it sounds sweet too."

"I just didn't expect it from him," I moaned, throwing my head back in annoyance. "I didn't expect him to tell me about California."

Nancy's eyes went wide. "He told you about California?"

What was wrong with that? "Yeah. So?" I asked defensively.

A gentle smile crossed Nancy's lips. "Rachel, I've seen Billy talk to

pretty much every student at school, but I don't see him go back to anyone the way he does with you," she pointed out. I knew that she was right, but I didn't want to admit it. That would give me hope that we could maybe be more than friends. "I've never heard him talk about California to anyone else. As soon as someone brings it up, he stops the conversation. You're the only person he's told. I wonder why that is."

I threw my head back in annoyance. As hard as I tried, I didn't get Billy. "Okay, enough boy talk," I said, waving off the conversation. "I need to get my mind off of Billy Hargrove."

"Why don't you come to the game with Steve and me?" Nancy offered. It seemed to be my only option for the night. "He'll be on his way to come to get me in a few hours. It'll be a good chance to not think about Billy."

That was what she needed to say to get me to go along with it. I thought about Nancy's words for a moment. I wasn't sure about it. I'd meant what I'd said so many times before. I hated football and found it an extremely boring game. Though I didn't want to sit at home alone on a Saturday night. I wasn't used to being alone as often as I had been since moving to Hawkins. I had to do something other than sitting around and hang out with my parents. Plus, being out and keeping busy would give me a chance to not think about Billy.

"You know what? That sounds like a good idea," I said honestly.

Maybe it was time for me to try and be a normal high school student. "Go get your stuff," Nancy said.

"Okay. Hang on. I'll be right back," I said. Nancy nodded as I turned and ran back into the house to grab my keys, sunglasses, and wallet from off the counter. I raised my voice to yell at my parents. "Hey, I'm going to go to the game with Nancy and Steve tonight."

"That sounds like fun. I'm glad you're getting out," Mom said.

"We hope Hawkins wins!" Dad called.

"I'll let you know how it goes! See you later!" I called back.

"Have a good night!" Dad yelled.

"Love you!" Mom added.

Once I'd waved at them, I turned and ran back to the front yard with Nancy. We walked into her front yard and plopped down in front of the house. It wouldn't be until nearly six that Steve would come to get us and it was barely midday now. We sat and chatted for a while, enjoying ourselves and talking about what was going on. We did spend a while talking about our love lives. Nancy still wasn't sure what was going on between Steve and Jonathan and I was annoyed with my flirtatious conversations with Billy.

Neither one of our love lives was going very well these days. Nancy was torn between her feelings for Jonathan and Steve. Nancy had a lot of history with Steve and he was her first love, but Jonathan had grown very close with her the year prior. Nancy had even thought he may have been the one. I admitted that I'd never had such conflicting feelings as I had for Billy. He was completely my type but I admitted to Nancy that I was afraid he would drop me if we slept together. Eventually, both frustrated by the conversation, Nancy and I banned boy talk.

Instead, the two of us sat in the grass and talked for a long time about my life back in Florida. Nancy was fascinated by my old life. She loved hearing about the number of times that I had nearly missed the first period of classes because I had been hanging out at the beach for too long. I told Nancy about the city I used to live in and that there were always malls nearby. Nancy sounded fascinated and though she loved her little town of Hawkins, she would love to see and spend some time in a big city.

It was close to six when Steve pulled up to grab Nancy for the game. He was happy to see that I would be coming to the game too. I admitted that I didn't want to sit at home on a Saturday night when in my old life I would have been out on a date or hanging out with friends. I teased Steve for his disgusting car and laughed as he chucked an old fry wrapper at me. I remained otherwise quiet for most of the ride, letting Nancy and Steve talk. They seemed more relaxed tonight. I wasn't sure if it was because I was there too.

The three of us got to the football stadium just after six o'clock. The game was set to start at six-thirty. It was filled with hundreds of students from Hawkins High School coming to see the kickoff of the sports year. I walked with Nancy and Steve toward the bleachers on the far side of the stadium, saying hello to some of our friends in the process. I headed up toward the top of the bleachers to wait for the game to start with Nancy on my right side and Steve on Nancy's other side.

For a while we watched the cheerleaders perform their peppy routines and listened to the band as they played. I smiled as I chatted with Steve and Nancy. We talked a lot about the college essay that Steve had been struggling with over the last few days. Nancy was trying to convince him that it wasn't that bad but neither Steve nor I believed her. I knew that Nancy could have been a little less direct about Steve's subpar writing skills but ultimately decided to let the couple handle that conversation themselves.

It was nice to at least be out of the house but I did wish that we were doing something other than hanging out at the football game. I knew that we would be here for at least two hours. I had to hope that I would be able to get myself invested in the game. I smirked to myself as Steve and Nancy relaxed and began harassing each other like a real couple. It was nice to see. I didn't mind being the third wheel if it meant that they were on the mend. Though, I did want something to drink.

So, I rose from my spot on the bleachers. "Rachel? You okay?" Nancy asked worriedly.

"I'm going to get a soda. You guys want anything?" I offered.

"No, thank you," Nancy said.

"I'm good," Steve added.

The couple moved back so that I could get to the stairs. I walked down the bleachers and headed toward the snack stand that was near the entrance of the stadium. I passed some of our friends and smiled, exchanging brief pleasantries as I passed them. The conversations didn't last more than a few seconds. I got in line at the snack stand

behind a girl my age who was ordering some food. I stood in line for a few moments, glancing around. It was about half an hour until the game began. In the meantime, I enjoyed the breeze that was going through my hair.

A few seconds passed before I heard a shout. "Rachel!"

I turned back, broken from my peaceful trance to see that Mark, the football player who had asked me out a few times since I had started at Hawkins High School, was standing behind me and smiling happily. "Hey, Mark," I greeted as he walked up to me.

He looked surprised that I was here. I was a little surprised that I had come. "So, you decided to come to the game after all," Mark commented, pulling the helmet off of his head.

"Oh, I thought I'd at least check it out," I said. Mark smiled as I threw my head back to nod at the scoreboard. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Mark smiled. "I've got a few minutes."

I rolled my eyes at his confidence and stepped up once the girl in front of me collected her food and headed to the stands. "One Coke, please," I told the teenage cashier, who nodded at me.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Mark said, making me smile. "So, are you going to be cheering for me?"

"That depends on whether or not you win," I replied.

Mark laughed. "Really? I could use you cheering for me."

The last thing Mark needed was me cheering for him. He already had hundreds of students in the bleachers who would be cheering for him. "Please, the star quarterback of Hawkins High School doesn't need the new girl cheering for him," I huffed.

"No, but he'd like it," Mark admitted.

At least he was trying to flirt with me. I rolled my eyes as my soda was placed on the counter by the teenage cashier. "That'll be forty

cents, please," the boy said.

"Sure," I said, digging through my pocket.

"Her drink is on me," Mark said, reaching for his wallet.

"Her drink is on her," I shot back, pushing Mark's arm away as I scowled at him. I pulled out my wallet and took out a dollar. "I don't let guys pay for me. Here you go."

"Thanks," the cashier said.

The boy handed me over the soda and my change as I turned back to Mark. "Is football still not your thing?" he asked.

"Not at all, but I thought I may as well try and enjoy some normal high school things," I said.

"Like going out with the star football player?" Mark offered, waggling his eyebrows.

It wasn't the kind of flirting that I normally responded to. I preferred a slightly sleazier route. I snorted at the look on Mark's face as I took the first sip of my Coke. "Not even in your dreams," I told Mark seriously, turning to walk away.

He had a long way to go before he was my type. Mark laughed as I turned back and shot him a wink before walking away. I appreciated that Mark was being a little more forward with me than he had been over the past week but it didn't change that I wasn't interested in going out with the quarterback. I was much more interested in the smoking hot mess that was Billy Hargrove. I scowled at myself as I walked back into the bleachers toward Steve and Nancy. I had to stop thinking about Billy.

Once I got back to Steve and Nancy, the three of us spent a few minutes chatting quietly as we waited for the game to start, laughing and having a good time. I was a little surprised to find that I was glad to have come to the game with them instead of sitting at home. At least here I got to be around people my age. Steve and I spent much of the time leading up to the beginning of the game teasing each other. I shoved Steve as he told me that I had a shitty taste in men. I

knew that he had seen me with Mark when I was at the concession stand.

While we were hanging around waiting for the game to start, some of Steve and Nancy's friends came to visit. Well, there were more of Steve's friends than Nancy's. I knew that Nancy didn't care for his friends nearly as much as he did and it seemed that Steve had been trying harder and harder to distance himself from them lately. When Tommy, Carol, and some of their other friends came up to say hello, I noticed that Steve shooed them away quickly. He knew that Nancy and I weren't fond of them.

The game began at a few minutes past six-thirty and Nancy, Steve, and I turned to watch. Mark glanced into the stands as he ran onto the field, smirking at me as I rolled my eyes. "Really?" Steve snapped, looking at me.

"I didn't do anything!" I barked in my defense.

I smacked Steve over the back of the head as I stood up, making Nancy laugh. "Where are you going?" Steve asked.

"The bathroom. Jeez, you try and be discreet around here," I muttered.

He and Nancy laughed. "Try not to run into any more idiot jocks or asshole new kids on the way," Steve said.

"Don't get jealous. You're still my favorite," I teased.

Steve shoved my hand away as I reached over and started running my fingers through his long (and extremely styled) hair. Nancy laughed as Steve fell back into her lap, taking her in his arms and pulling her into him. I smiled at the pair as I walked away. I was glad to see that the two of them seemed to be getting along much better these days. Maybe their relationship could work itself out. I walked down the stairs and off of the bleachers, heading toward the bathrooms when I heard my name being called.

"Rach."

A warming sensation in my chest ran down to my toes. There was

only one person in Hawkins who would be calling me by that name. It was the one person I had been eager to see again but hadn't expected to see tonight. I turned back and smiled when I saw that Billy Hargrove was standing a few feet behind me in a brown leather jacket, half-open deep blue collared shirt, and his tight-fitted jeans. I smiled eagerly, glad to see that he had decided to come to the game after all. Billy walked up to me and wrapped an arm over my shoulder, pulling me into him.

A little laugh escaped my mouth as I punched Billy in the shoulder. "Billy Hargrove, the scourge of high school society is at the big game?" I chirped playfully.

"Only because I heard Rachel Winters would be here," Billy replied, grinning at me.

"That's the only reason?" I asked curiously.

Billy thought about it for a moment before saying, "The cheerleaders in short skirts don't hurt."

I scowled and shoved him. "You're disgusting."

"So, why are you still here?" Billy asked.

"You came over here, Hargrove," I snapped.

"But you still haven't walked away," Billy pointed out.

A fault on my part, I supposed. "You can be useful sometimes," I teased.

If we ever got the chance to hook up I was sure he would show me exactly how useful he was. I snapped my fingers as we walked over to the closest set of bleachers to us. We took a seat on the bleachers together as I threw my legs over his lap. Billy placed one hand on my bare thigh as I took a spare cigarette out. He smiled at me as he pulled out his lighter and lit the end. I placed the cigarette in my mouth and took a deep breath, looking up and blowing the smoke into the air. Billy reached over and took the cigarette from my hands.

"Hey!" I snapped as he took a long drag. "Get your own damn

cigarettes!"

"I like yours better," Billy teased, leaning into me and blowing the smoke in my face.

"You just like it when a girl talks to you," I huffed.

"Actually, I prefer them when they're not talking," Billy shot back.

"Funny, I was going to say the same thing about you," I teased, grinning at him.

"Just tell me when and where," Billy said confidently.

Right here, right now... I smiled as the two of us sat back against the bleachers and shared the cigarette, passing it between ourselves. We didn't say much while we watched the players run back and forth on the field. I knew that even though the two of us were watching the game, we were focused on each other. We were acutely aware of each other. Billy's warm hand was resting gently on my thigh as I leaned into him. We both smirked slightly as the crowd went up in a roar as Hawkins scored the first touchdown.

A few minutes passed before Billy broke the silence. "How interested in the game are you?" he asked.

"Depends on what's being offered," I said honestly.

"You want to take off?" Billy asked.

That was exactly what I wanted. I stopped myself from jumping on the opportunity and thought about it for a moment. I was bored stiff by the game and if there was one thing that Billy wasn't, it was boring. "Yeah. Wait here for a minute," I told him. Billy nodded and released his grip on my leg as I pushed off of him and went sprinting up the bleachers toward where Steve and Nancy were still sitting. "Hey."

They both looked up in shock. "There you are!" Nancy yelled.

"What the hell took you so long?" Steve asked.

I must have been gone a lot longer than I had initially expected. "I ran into a friend. I'm going to take off," I told them.

Steve and Nancy exchanged a worried look with each other that reminded me exactly of a look my parents would have given me. Steve narrowed his gaze at me. "Hargrove?" he asked knowingly.

"Maybe," I muttered.

The couple exchanged another look. "Just be careful, Rachel," Nancy sighed, knowing that I wasn't going to abandon my plans with Billy.

"Always. I'll swing by in the morning," I promised.

"Goodnight, Rachel," Nancy said, leaning over to hug me.

"Goodnight," Steve said, pressing a kiss against my cheek as I pulled back. "We'll let you know how the game ends."

"You know what? I don't care that much," I said honestly.

We all laughed as I turned and walked back through the stands toward where I had left Billy. I noticed that a crowd had already formed around him. I wasn't surprised. He had immediately earned his status as a popular kid. If I was a little friendlier, I might have earned that badge too. Billy was surrounded by Carol, Tommy, and some of their other friends. I noticed that Tina was standing very close to Billy, which infuriated me to no end. The moment Billy saw me, he pushed through the crowd with a half-hearted departing comment.

"You ready?" Billy asked me.

"Yeah. What about you and your posse?" I said, throwing my head back to the grouchy crowd.

"They're not that interesting," Billy said carelessly.

"But I am?" I asked disbelievingly.

"You are," Billy confirmed.

The question was, why? I glanced at Billy but knew that he wouldn't tell me why he was interested in me. Not any serious reasons, after all. I figured that he would say something sleazy. The two of us walked off and I smiled as his hand slid around the back of my waist. We headed out toward his car. It was nice that Billy at least knew how to be kind of gentlemanly as he opened the passenger door for me. I dropped into the car as he closed the door behind me, heading over and throwing himself into the driver's side.

"Look at you. Someone does know how to be a gentleman," I teased as he closed his door behind himself.

"I know how to treat a woman, Rach," Billy said.

Though he never spoke to any of his dates after he went out with them once. "Why don't I believe that?" I asked.

"You'll see," Billy said, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

I rolled my eyes as I scowled at Billy again. He was grinning at me as he laid a hand on my thigh. I blushed slightly as he reached over and placed a hand on my upper thigh. I hadn't had a man ever be as forward with me as Billy was. It was something I had never had but so far it was something I liked. Billy reached over to the ignition and turned the car on. It roared to life and the radio began blasting 'Round and Round' by Ratt through the speakers. A smile formed against my lips.

"I can't say much for your taste in friends, Hargrove, but your taste in music is fantastic," I said, speaking over the music.

"Good taste in music, good taste in cars..." Billy said, trailing off slowly.

"Good taste in women, too, apparently," I teased.

"I've got a good eye," Billy said.

Sometimes he had a good eye. Not always, evidenced by him going out with Tina. I smiled as Billy pulled out of the stadium parking lot. "Where are we going?" I asked, continuing before he had a chance to answer. "If we say to your house, I'm going to punch you on the

nose."

Billy laughed. "Not yet, Rach. I told you, I know how to treat a woman."

"You know how to treat a woman?" I asked disbelievingly. Billy glanced at me quickly, breaking his eye contact from the road for a moment to nod at me. "Somehow I don't think Tina would believe that. You hooked up with her, she tried to talk to you today, and you immediately abandoned her to take me out."

"Would you have rather me stayed with her?" Billy asked.

"I never said that," I replied, causing us to smile at each other. "Would you rather be with her?"

"Not at all," Billy said.

We would have argued had he said otherwise. I smirked as we exchanged a quick look. I felt Billy's hand tighten on my thigh a little bit as his fingers crept upward. I blushed slightly but closed my eyes, putting my feet up on the dashboard and closing my eyes. I leaned back in the seat slightly as Billy's fingers moved inward, creeping along my upper inner thigh. I smiled, deliberately leaning back to ensure that my tank top was dragging down my chest. I was glad to know that Bill was staring at me.

Without a doubt, Billy's eyes were locked on me. "Eyes on the road, Hargrove," I chided.

"You've got your eyes closed," Billy pointed out.

"And you've got yours right down my shirt," I said.

"Consider it a compliment," Billy teased.

"I do," I insisted. I cracked an eye open for a moment as that we could meet eyes and smile at each other. "Can I ask you something?"

"I get the feeling you will anyway," Billy said.

Well, he wasn't wrong about that. I smiled at him. "Correct. Why

me?" I asked. Billy hummed in misunderstanding. "You don't strike me as the kind of guy who pursues a girl."

Billy glanced at me and made it no secret that he was staring down my shirt. "I'm not, but you're hot," he pointed out.

"At least you're honest," I giggled.

"I'm not one to dance around, Winters," Billy pointed out.

He had made that much painfully obvious. I blushed slightly. I realized again that I had never had someone be as forward with me as Billy was. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the seat again as we returned to the quiet drive. We were silent for a little while but Billy's hand remained on my thigh and I was glad for it. I liked knowing that someone may not care about me, but was interested in and attracted to me. It made me feel better to know that he was one-hundred percent interested in me.

As we headed out to wherever we were going, the two of us chatted quietly. I had never let someone drive me to a place that I didn't know. I told him that I wasn't fond of surprises. He promised that this would be a good surprise. I talked to Billy about how I wasn't used to being alone the way that I was now. I missed having the girls around for sleepovers and the boys to roughhouse with at the beach. Billy told me that he would happily roughhouse with me. I smacked him in the chest, earning one of his laughs.

When I felt the engine of the car turn off, I opened my eyes and was immediately shocked to see where we were. "Benny's Burgers?" I asked, staring up at the diner in shock. I turned to Billy with a playful grin. "You are a classy date, Hargrove."

"It's not like they have many five-diamond restaurants in Hawkins," Billy snapped.

"I suppose it bodes well that you at least know what a five-diamond restaurant is," I teased as we jumped out of the car. Billy laughed as we walked up to the diner entrance. He opened the door for me, grinning pointedly. I rolled my eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Billy said.

Billy had an arm wrapped around my waist as we walked over to a booth toward the back of the restaurant and took a seat. I was sitting on the far side of the booth as Billy took a seat on the closer side. I blushed slightly as he gave me a pointed stare as I scooted into the middle of the booth. I tugged down on my shirt a bit as I slid into place and grinned as I watched him shift uncomfortably. I liked knowing that I could get to him as much as he could get to me. I kicked my foot up between Billy's legs, gently nudging his inner thigh.

"Something bothering you?" I asked innocently.

Billy pressed down on a pressure point on the bottom of my right foot just underneath my toes. The pressure elicited a half-moan, half-pained grunt. Billy smirked at my reaction. "Good to know what I have to look forward to," Billy teased.

As usual, I wasn't sure if I wanted to slap or sleep with Billy. I was about to snap at him but I stopped, deciding to smirk at him instead. I pushed my foot against where I knew he wanted me. His body was shaking against mine. "Hargrove, you have no idea what you have to look forward to," I said quietly.

Billy took my leg in his hands and ran his palms up my bare skin. "Winters."

"Yes?" I asked innocently.

His normally blue eyes had gone almost black. "I'm going to f -"

"What can I get you two?"

My head shot back to reality so fast I almost went falling out of the booth. I jumped back from Billy's grasp, placing my foot against the floor. Smirking at my discomfort from the scowl of the waitress, Billy nodded for me to order first. "Um, a chocolate shake, please," I told the older woman, who nodded at Billy.

"I'll have the same," Billy told her.

"Sure thing," the woman said, scribbling something on her notepad as she walked off.

As the waitress headed back behind the counter, I smirked at Billy, who was grinning back at me. Think of something else, Rachel. "So, is this what a date with Billy Hargrove is like?" I teased.

"I wasn't aware that this was a date," Billy said, smirking.

I scowled at him, realizing the mistake in my words a moment too late. "It's not a date," I snapped.

"If you want a date all you have to do is ask," Billy said.

"We are not going on a date, Hargrove. Not today and not ever," I barked.

"Are you so sure about that?" Billy asked.

No. "Why did you go to the football game?" I asked.

There was no way he had gone just because he was bored. If he went to the football game, it was for a specific reason. Some part of me felt genuinely connected to Billy. He had been a good friend to me since we'd met, but I wanted to know more about him. "I had to get out of the house for a while and you said something about the game this morning," Billy admitted.

His comment about having to get out of the house didn't escape my notice but I quickly decided not to push. He would tell me about that when he was ready. "Well, I'm glad you came," I said honestly.

"Me too," Billy said. We smiled at each other as the waitress came and brought our shakes over. "Thank you."

"Thanks," I said.

Billy pulled his drink to himself before getting out of the booth. "I'll be right back," he told me.

"Okay," I said.

If he left me here without a ride, I was going to break his jaw. Thankfully, he was just walking over to the jukebox. I felt a little flutter in my chest as I watched him flip through the songs. I liked

Billy. I liked him a lot more than I had ever liked anyone else. When Billy came back to the booth, he sat on my side of the bench. I smiled as he threw an arm over my shoulder, tugging me toward him. I leaned into his body slightly, deciding that I didn't mind him being so close even if we had room to spread out.

"Tell me something," I said, stirring my chocolate shake.

"What?" Billy asked.

"Tell me what Billy Hargrove is really like," I urged. Billy raised a blonde eyebrow at my request. "Tell me something that you wouldn't tell just any girl you go out with. Come on, I'll repay the favor."

He wasn't an open book. If I wanted to learn more about him, I had to nudge him along. "I don't want to leave just because I miss California," Billy admitted after a moment. I raised an eyebrow curiously. "I want to get the hell away from my family."

Billy had said it enough times that I was now positive that something was going on at home. There was a reason that he never talked about his family. It wasn't a good situation. I placed a hand on Billy's leg as comfortably as possible. "Well, if you ever need to get out for a while you can always come and find me," I offered truthfully.

Billy's gaze softened as he kissed the top of my head. I smiled at him. "Your turn," Billy goaded.

There was only one thing that I was keeping a secret that I was comfortable enough to divulge to Billy. "We didn't leave Florida because my dad got a new job here," I admitted. Billy nodded. He had made it no secret that he'd known that I was lying about our move. "It was my fault." Billy's eyebrows shot to his forehead in surprise. "I made a stupid and dangerous mistake and... there was no staying there after what I did. I don't have a right to be upset that we're here. I was the one who landed us here."

"What did you do?" Billy asked curiously.

"Why do you hate your family?" I replied. We smiled at each other but didn't keep pushing. We weren't going to go that in-depth with

each other. Not yet. I smiled as I ran my index fingernail over his knee. "I like this version of Billy."

"Don't get used to him," Billy snapped, not unkindly.

When we got back to school, I knew he would pretend that we had never discussed his family or California. I smirked, pulling away from him. I was sitting with my back against the wall as I threw my feet over his lap. Billy laughed under his breath, laying his hands on my bare legs. "What do you want to do? When you go back to California?" I asked curiously.

Other than ruthlessly flirting with women or surfing, Billy didn't seem to have much of a passion in life. "I don't know. My whole life's just been taking one day at a time. I don't think about the future," he admitted.

"I can tell. You're an in-the-moment kind of guy," I said.

"And you're an in-the-moment kind of girl," Billy replied.

"True. What moment do you want to be in right now?" I asked.

Billy's hands tightened on my bare thighs as he yanked me into him. My skin burned slightly on the plastic booth but I couldn't bring myself to care as our hips (and something else) were now pressed together. "This one," Billy muttered, speaking almost against my throat. I felt my legs start to tremble. "I could use a place a little more private, though."

I smirked at him. "What kind of girl do you think I am?" I teased.

"My favorite kind," Billy replied boldly. He wasn't wrong. He knew that I was holding out because I was stubborn, not nervous, or prudish. I leaned forward and took a lock of Billy's wavy blonde hair in between my fingers and tugged on it. I could tell by Billy's excited grunt that we were each other's types. He wrapped a hand around my tank top strap in retaliation, pulling me into him so that we were chest-to-chest. "Come on, Rach. We could have all kinds of fun together."

"I know exactly what kind of fun you'd like to have," I told him.

"You should be jumping at the chance, then," Billy said.

"At the chance or on you?" I shot back.

That was what we both wanted. I ran my fingers down Billy's bare chest, working my way under his open shirt. I grinned confidently as he swallowed thickly. "Let's see if you're as tough as you look. We can go somewhere a little more private and I'll give you the workout of your life," Billy said, his voice turning into a near-growl.

Billy's fingertips slowly ran up my thighs. It felt like I couldn't suck in a full breath. I had liked plenty of guys before and had gotten excited being around some of them, but I had never felt a sudden attraction to someone the way I had with Billy. The two of us didn't look away from each other's eyes as his hands moved up my thighs and slipped under the hem of my daisy dukes. His fingers roved over my hips and hooked around the waistband of my underwear. My legs were trembling weakly as Billy moved his head toward mine.

"No," I snapped angrily, shoving away from Billy as I shook my head. "You are not getting me with the same sleazy one-liners you use on every other girl."

"I don't use those on every girl," Billy shot back teasingly. He moved his mouth past mine and pressed it almost up against my ear. "If you don't want this, why haven't you stopped my hands?"

I pushed off of Billy's thighs, shoving his hands off of my legs. "Fuck off," I snapped.

Billy grinned. "With pleasure."

He was the biggest pain in the ass I'd ever met in my life. That didn't stop me from laughing as I nudged him gently. We smirked at each other as I tried to even out my breathing. Billy made my nerves fray. I was broken from my thoughts when I realized that Air Supply's 'Every Woman in the World' was playing over the speakers. "Oh, I love this song," I said quietly.

Billy smirked. "Good."

That was when I realized that it was the song he had picked at the

jukebox. "I didn't know you liked this kind of music," I told him.

"I think we've already established the things you don't know about me," Billy teased. I laughed under my breath as I took another sip of my shake. Once I'd popped the straw out of my mouth, Billy leaned forward and wiped the edge of my mouth where a streak of chocolate had been. He licked his thumb and smirked at me as my stomach jolted. "Thank you."

"You have no shame, Hargrove," I chuckled, trying to stop the blush from rising to my cheeks.

"Not when I want something," Billy said.

"Why me?" I asked.

Billy's eyes dropped to pointedly stare at my chest. I groaned in annoyance as I shoved Billy again, making him laugh. "You're hot," Billy said.

I threw my head back and laughed. Billy smirked at my embarrassed reaction. "You're not so bad yourself, Hargrove," I replied.

The two of us stared at each other for a long time. Neither one of us knew what to say. If we made one move, I knew that it would be something we couldn't take back. As stupid as I felt for admitting it, I would have been devastated if I had slept with Billy and he had never spoken to me again. I would have missed his friendship. I would have rather stayed in this limbo than risk him getting what he wanted and leaving our friendship. Of course, the temptation I felt when I was around him was strangling.

Though, sometimes the only thing you could do with temptation was to give into it. I had never wanted to give in to temptation as much as I did when I was around Billy. All I wanted to do was drag him behind the building and go to town with him. I knew that he was feeling the same way. Billy took a sip of his shake, grinning at me. I shifted backward in the booth, pressing my back against the table so that I could face Billy, throwing a leg over his lap. We didn't break eye contact as I took my straw in between my lips.

My tongue swirled the straw around for a moment before I pushed it back, placing the cup down on the table. Billy's hands tightened on my thigh so much that it almost hurt. I had never been one to let pain bother me, though. It only egged me on. I glanced down for a moment to see that there were deep red marks along my thighs. Billy leaned into me, our lips now mere inches apart. I swallowed my saliva thickly, unsure of what I was supposed to do. I wanted to give in. I had never wanted anything so much.

At that moment, the waitress walked over and placed our check on the table. I jumped back from Billy in surprise. "Here you two go," the waitress told us tonelessly.

The middle-aged woman scowled at us as she walked off. I blushed at her reaction. I imagined that the woman didn't enjoy watching teenagers hook up in the booths. "You knew she was there," I snapped at Billy.

He shrugged. "I don't mind an audience. I could teach them a thing or two."

"Please," I huffed. There was no way he was going to be the one to teach me something. I moved back into Billy, reaching out and placing a hand over his throat, putting a gentle pressure there. Billy's thoughts were screaming what I already knew: he wanted me. "I'll be the one teaching you something."

"Do you want to test that theory?" Billy asked.

"Where do you suggest?" I asked.

"Anywhere, anytime, Winters," Billy said.

Did that include tonight? I could have gone for that. A massive blush filled my cheeks as I threw caution to the wind. One brief hookup wouldn't be that bad. Well, it wouldn't be brief, if I was being fair. We both knew that we wouldn't sleep. Billy and I were centimeters apart when a shout came from behind us. "Excuse me!" the owner of the diner yelled. "Can you two take the hookup somewhere else?"

I shot away from Billy, my face brilliant red. "Sorry. We'll just... pay

the bill and go," I muttered stupidly.

Billy chuckled. "Don't get shy now."

"Shut up. Give me my bill," I snapped.

"There's only one," Billy said, holding up the check.

"Oh, I didn't think about asking her to split it. What did mine come out to?" I asked, grabbing my wallet.

"It's fine. I've got it," Billy said, taking out his wallet.

"I don't think so. I don't let guys pay for me," I snapped indignantly. I didn't let Mark pay for me and I didn't want to let Billy pay for me. He ignored my insistence that I would pay for myself as the waitress returned. He handed her some cash and the receipt back. "What do I owe you?"

"How about a kiss?" Billy teased.

I rolled my eyes. "How about a dollar?" I offered.

"No," Billy said.

"This is not a date. You don't have to pay for my shake," I growled.

It might have only been a dollar, but I didn't want him spending any of his money on me. It was something I'd never liked people doing. I liked paying for myself. "Accept the damn shake and shut your mouth," Billy snapped at me. I scowled silently as Billy slid out of the booth. He took my hand and yanked me after him. I grunted under my breath as I stumbled into his chest and he wrapped an arm around my waist, keeping me close to himself. "I know how to treat a woman, Rach."

"Because you paid for a shake that costs a dollar?" I huffed.

We had been walking toward Billy's car when he shoved me away from him. I thought that I would go flying into the dirt road when Billy then tightened his grip around my waist and shoved me up against the car. I let out a half-grunt, half-gasp as he used his body to

push me up against the frame. "Because I know how to leave them pleased," Billy growled, trapping me between his arms.

"I'm -" I stammered weakly. "I'm not -"

"Pleased?" Billy interrupted knowingly, grinning at himself. "I bet I know how I could. I see that look in your eyes. You don't want things to be romantic. You want it so hard that you can't walk for a week." My breath shortened as it escaped from my lungs. He wasn't wrong. "You want someone to do things that you feel like you can't tell anyone else. But you can tell me. I won't judge you for it... and I'll do it all."

He may have been correct, but I wasn't going to let him have the high ground. I grabbed the back of Billy's leather jacket and used his weight against him to flip us, pressing Billy against the door. He grunted but didn't look bothered otherwise. He looked thrilled with my boldness. "What about you? Do you want to tell me what you want? You look like the tough guy. You act like him. Have you ever been with a girl who doesn't let you be in charge? Can you tolerate it?" I asked quietly.

There was no doubt that Billy was normally dominant. I was glad to know that I wasn't the only one who was overwhelmed with the other. I felt Billy's heart pounding in his chest as I moved a hand up his bare chest, slowly sliding it back down his body, undoing the buttons. To hell with avoiding him. I used my spare hand to press my thumb into his throat and use the other fingers to wrap into his hair, tugging roughly. Billy groaned as I smirked up at him. One of his hands dug into my rear as the other tugged my tank top down my front.

"Hey!" the owner of the diner shouted, breaking the lust-filled air that had settled over us. "Not out here! Do I need to call the cops?"

"Go! Go!" Billy shouted, pushing me into the car.

Billy and I bounced apart, both of us flushed and breathing heavily. The owner of the restaurant was threatening to call the cops for indecent exposure. We threw ourselves into the opposite ends of the car as Billy started the engine and threw the car into drive, heading

down the road as quickly as possible. I swore that I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. For a while, the two of us focused on the road. A few minutes passed before I started chuckling. After a few seconds, Billy joined me. We were in hysterics within seconds.

"I don't think we're ever going to be allowed back there," I said once we had calmed down.

"The shake wasn't that good anyway," Billy said. I smiled, still breathing heavily. I didn't know what to say after the heated moment we had just had. "Did the moment pass?"

"Not for good, I hope," I said.

"No," Billy confirmed, making me smile. "Are you parked at the school?"

"No, Steve took me and Nancy to the game in his car," I said. I felt like a moron. I'd forgotten that Steve was supposed to bring me home with Nancy after the game. I was positive that it was over by now. "Uh, can you drop me at home? I think the game's over."

Billy smirked. "Sure."

It didn't take a genius to know what the look on his face was for. "That is not an invitation," I snapped.

"You seemed all for it earlier," Billy pointed out.

"Call it a brief lapse in judgment," I huffed.

"Was I right?" Billy asked eagerly.

"We're not discussing this," I barked.

"Because I was right," Billy repeated, chuckling.

He would have been the first guy I had ever discussed that kind of stuff with. "That is not a conversation for tonight," I snapped. "What about you? I know you're the dominant type. Have you ever let a girl be in control?"

"No one's ever tried," Billy said.

I glanced at him and grinned. "Maybe we'll have to change that."

Billy broke his eye contact from the road for a moment to stare at me. I smiled as he turned back. "You know, whatever the hell you did to get yourself kicked out of Florida, I'm damn glad you did it," he said, lighting a cigarette with one hand.

He had taken half a puff when I reached over and took the cigarette from his lips, puffing on it myself for a moment. Billy grinned as he sent me another glance before looking back at the road. "Your family may be a bunch of assholes, but I'm glad they moved you here," I told him honestly.

Neither one of us spoke for a while after that. I noticed that Billy was driving very slowly on the way back to my house. I wondered if it was because he didn't want to let me go. I reached over and placed a hand on his lap as we drove. Billy took one of his hands and slowly ran it up and down my arm. I decided to mislead Billy a few times to take the long way back to my house as we started chatting quietly. He must have known that I was leading him in the wrong direction but he didn't say anything about it.

We talked a little bit about our classes and the work we had to do in our respective ones. I complained that my teachers were sexist and didn't listen to anything I had to say. Billy teased me by saying that the teachers weren't used to seeing tits on any of their students - or anyone else. I saw the smirk on his lips as I ran my hands a little higher up his thigh. Billy admitted that he hardly paid attention to his classes. I admonished him and reminded him that if he showed some incentive, I would study with him however he wanted me to.

The two of us enjoyed ourselves as we discussed our study sessions. I tried to direct the conversation toward the real studies that we would need to focus on, but Billy redirected the conversation toward the kind of studying he would like to do. He still wasn't making it a secret that he wanted me. Of course, I hadn't helped his desires along. I wanted him as much as he wanted me. If I wasn't so damn stubborn, I would have had him already. I knew that it was only a matter of time before we hooked up.

The question was whether or not we were going to hook up and then continue on the way we had been. I wasn't sure. Billy had made some comments to the effect that he wouldn't drop me, but I wasn't sure that I could believe him. Even so, the more he talked about what he was going to do to me, the less I cared about that possibility. I interrupted Billy's comments about potentially coming over to study with me as I ran my hand slowly up his leg, twisting my fingers inward on his thigh.

The muscles in Billy's thighs were tensing as I bumped into something. I grinned madly as Billy took my hand in his, bending it back to the point that it was almost painful. "If you keep doing that, you're never making it home," Billy warned.

"Promises, promises," I teased, taking another long drag of the cigarette and breathing it into his face. I kneeled up on my knees and moved into Billy, who was fighting to keep his gaze on the road ahead. "Do you want me to stop?"

Billy's jaw tensed. "You don't need me to tell you what I want."

"Maybe I want to hear it," I said playfully.

Without warning, Billy steered the car off to the side of the road. I was thrown against his body as Billy put the car in park. I sucked in a nervous breath as Billy turned to face me. I knew that I was playing with fire the way I was touching and grabbing him. I knew that teasing him would push him likely past where he could still control himself. Neither one of us wanted to control ourselves anymore. I knew that neither one of us had much self-control anyway.

I jumped in surprise as Billy took his hands and wrapped them around my thigh. He pulled me toward him so hard that I felt the skin on the backs of my thighs rub raw. I banged my knee against the gearshift but I didn't do much more than groan in pain. There was no space to stretch out comfortably in the front seat but we were too eager to move into the back seat where we would be able to spread out. Billy shoved me back and I smacked my head on the window. I wrapped a hand into his hair and tugged on it roughly.

A groan escaped Billy's mouth that told me that he liked it as rough

as I did. I moved a knee in between his legs, knocking them apart. Billy wrapped a hand around my hip, tightening his fingers so hard they would undoubtedly bruise. Billy leaned over me as he slid a hand down my front, working his fingers under my shirt. I pulled open Billy's shirt, pressing a kiss against his collarbone. I smirked as I felt the groan erupt in his throat. His hands moved down my waist again and rested against the button on my shorts.

His mouth tilted toward mine. We were about to kiss when suddenly, there was a knock at the car window. The two of us bounced apart as I yanked my shirt down to its proper position. Billy cleared his throat as he climbed back into the driver's seat calmly and rolled the window down. The cop was on my side but he ignored me as he looked over at Billy. My stare was fixed on my feet as I realized that I knew the cop. It was Jim Hopper, who Nancy had introduced me to on one of our walks.

"Shouldn't you two be at the big game tonight?" Hopper asked curiously, looking between us.

"We were, Officer. The game's over. I was just taking her home," Billy explained.

For a home run, more like it. "So, take her home. No stops along the way," Hopper insisted.

"Yes, Officer," we said together.

Hopper glared at us for a moment. I blushed, wishing Nancy had never introduced us. I was getting the fatherly stare from Hopper for my actions. My face was bright red as Hopper gave us a knowing nod and walked off. I breathed out slowly, trying to get back into my head. I couldn't bring myself to meet Billy's eyes as he shifted the car back into drive and headed back down the road. A smirk was written plainly on Billy's face. He was proud of himself for getting me as flustered as I was. I wasn't sure if I wanted to slap him or drag him into the woods.

We stayed in silence for a while until I realized that we were extremely close to my house. "Um, take a right onto Maple Street," I instructed quietly.

Billy turned onto the road to follow my direction. "Maybe the third time's the charm," he teased.

I smirked as I turned to meet his eyes. "You had better be worth hypertension, Hargrove," I said, letting out a deep breath.

Billy laughed under his breath. "We both are."

I had to believe that. I smiled at him and instructed, "It's the next house on the right."

Billy nodded and drove up to my house. He stopped in front of the driveway, putting the car in park as he looked up at the house. "So, which one is your bedroom?" Billy asked teasingly.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I goaded.

"I would," Billy replied.

One day he would know. I took Billy's chin in my hands, moving his face to the side as I planted a small kiss against his cheek. Billy placed a hand behind my neck as I gave him a longer kiss than I had meant to. "Goodnight, Hargrove," I said quietly.

"Goodnight, Winters," Billy replied.

The two of us smiled at each other again. I felt like I was about to kiss him when I mentally told myself to get the hell out of the car before I did something stupid. I hopped out of the car and closed the door behind me, tapping against the frame and waving him off. Billy nodded at me. I figured he was about to take off when I realized that he was waiting for me to get inside. At least he knew how to be a gentleman when it counted. I got to the front door and waved Billy off. He replied with a two-fingered wave as he started down the road again.

After giving myself a moment to take some deep breaths, I finally wandered inside the house, walking around woozily. I was immediately met with my very angry sounding father. "The game went until ten o'clock?" I turned to the living room to give him a teasing smile. He must have already known that I wasn't just at the game. "How was the game?" Dad asked.

"It was good," I said noncommittally.

"Did Hawkins win?" Mom asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

My parents smiled at my honesty. "This mystery friend must be quite something. We can't wait to hear all about him," Mom said, walking up behind me and resting a hand on my shoulder. I hesitated, almost drunk on my night with Billy. "Only when you're ready."

"Goodnight. Love you both," I told them.

"Love you," they called back together.

They were laughing at me as I hugged both of my parents and walked upstairs. I closed my bedroom door behind me and leaned against it as I looked out of the window. I wished for a moment that Billy's car was still out there, but I would have invited him inside and I knew where that would lead. I had a stupid smile on my face that I was positive wasn't going away anytime soon. As I walked to my bed I sighed at myself. I had only been in Hawkins for two weeks and had only known Billy for one, but I knew that I was already in deep.

5. Chapter 4

The alarm on my bedside table began blaring as I leaned over and smacked the snooze button to stop the noise. I closed my eyes and turned over to go back to sleep when I realized that the sun was streaming through the windows. That wasn't a good sign. The sun was usually just starting to peek over the horizon when I woke up. It had fully risen now. I sat bolt upright in bed and looked at the alarm. It was six-fifty. School started at seven-twenty. My alarm had somehow been reset to half an hour later than normal.

"God damn it!" I shouted.

There was no doubt that I would be late today. I launched myself out of bed and went sprinting through my room, tripping over clothes as I began gathering everything I needed for the day. I shoved everything I needed for the day into my bag and threw my hair up into a messy bun with wavy pieces dangling out. It was good enough. I quickly rubbed some foundation onto my face and added a swipe of mascara and some lip gloss on top. I just wanted to make sure that I didn't look dead at school.

Once I was satisfied I had everything, I threw open the doors to my closet and started digging through it. I was having a hard time figuring out what was clean and what was dirty. Eventually, I settled on a pair of mid-waisted light wash jeans and a loose-fitting cropped gray tank top. I would likely get yelled at for my clothes but I didn't have time to find anything else. I slipped on a pair of chunky white sneakers and threw my wristwatch on. I grabbed my things for school and ran out of the room, sprinting to the stairs.

Just as I hit the landing, I heard my mother's voice coming up the stairs. "Rachel! Are you up?"

"I am! I'm coming!" I shouted back.

"Honey! You're going to be late," Dad yelled.

"I know, I know!" I shouted back, darting down the stairs, taking them two at a time. I slipped a little bit as I hit kitchen tiles. "Trust

me, it's my sole mission to get out of the house this morning."

As I darted into the kitchen, I grabbed an apple from the counter and took a large bite out of it. "Is that what you're wearing?" Dad asked.

"If you can find me something else to wear in the next thirty seconds, I'll change. Otherwise, I have to get out of here," I snarled.

"Take a jacket, please," Dad said, resigned to the fact that I didn't have time to change.

"Fine," I said, wanting to avoid the fight.

That now meant that I had to find a jacket. "Here. Take this," Mom offered, pointing to the kitchen table. I grabbed a piece of toast from the kitchen counter and shoved it in my mouth. I pulled my leather jacket off the back of the dining room chairs as I took another large bite out of my apple, slinging the jacket over my shoulders at the same time. I went to grab my plate and throw it in the sink when my mother stopped me. "Go. We'll get the plates."

"Thanks. Love you!" I yelled.

"Love you!" my parents yelled back.

They gave me a concerned glance as I grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder, darting out the front door. I sprinted to my car and practically launched myself into the front seat. I pressed a foot on the brake and cranked the key in the engine only to be met with a sputtering noise. I cranked the engine two more times, each time met with no response besides the sputtering. It could only mean one thing; the car battery was dead. I banged my hands on the steering wheel in aggravation. Not today.

"No! Come on!" I shouted.

I tried turning the engine over again, this time holding the key in place for a moment. It fought to start but ultimately died out again. I let out a nasty swear as I got out of the car and slammed the door behind me, kicking my tire in annoyance. My only option now was walking, as we only had one other car and my father needed it to get to his office on the other side of town. He would be leaving in five

minutes. He wouldn't have time to take me to school as he was a new employee and couldn't afford to be late.

It meant that I had no other choice but to walk to school. I slung my bag over my shoulder and started down the driveway, heading toward the school. I would be at least ten minutes late as I would be walking, but at least I would get there. Maybe the administration would understand my tardiness. I figured that this afternoon I would be able to ask Steve for a ride home. He would be dropping Nancy off anyway. Or, I could always ask Billy... As I began walking, I heard a rumble of thunder. I swallowed thickly. A rainstorm was all I needed.

As I first walked down the road I grumbled to myself, irritated that my car battery would die today of all days. The one day I was already late with rain close. I headed down Maple Street and turned onto the main drive, trying to walk as quickly as possible to beat the incoming rain. I was about a fifteen-minute walk from the school and the storm looked like it would be here in under five minutes. I couldn't even duck into a store to wait out the rain as there were no buildings on the road. If I didn't love my car so much, I would have been tempted to light it on fire.

The first few drops of rain fell on my bare arms after I had been walking for about three minutes. I reached for the zipper on my jacket and pulled it as far up as it would go. A cool breeze had begun with the incoming storm. I groaned, knowing that I should have just told my mother what had happened and missed school. I could have picked up my missed assignments tomorrow or called the school and asked Nancy to grab everything for me so I could have made up my work tonight.

It didn't take long for the black clouds to begin forming over my head. The breeze had picked up and the rain was beginning to spit a little heavier than it had been a few minutes ago. I was about ready to turn around and head back home so that I could avoid being soaking wet at school all day when I heard the rumbling of an engine behind me. I immediately recognized the 1979 Camaro that pulled up beside me. I forced myself to look ahead and avoid Billy's pointed stare as I continued walking toward the school.

Billy rolled down his window, staring at me as I walked, waiting for

me to speak first. "Now you're following me," I sighed.

"This is the road to get to school," Billy pointed out. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm walking, Hargrove," I snapped.

"You're aware you have a car?" Billy asked.

"I'm aware that my car battery is currently dead," I replied.

Billy laughed. "Get in. I'll give you a ride."

The last time we had been in his car, it hadn't ended well. "No, thank you," I said.

"You're going to walk in the rain?" Billy asked, looking up at the dark clouds.

"Some fresh air will do me good," I said.

Billy sped up for a moment, but instead of driving away, he turned the car at a sharp angle to cut me off. I stopped at Billy's window, scowling at him. He was grinning at me. "Come on, Rach. I'd love to give you a ride," Billy said.

His blue eyes were sparkling playfully. I smirked as I laid my hands on the window frame, leaning into him. "I'm sure you would," I purred.

"You know me well," Billy teased. We exchanged a small smirk as Billy leaned over, resting one of his hands over mine. He lowered his voice. "Are you nervous to be alone with me?"

I scowled. "Are you kidding?"

"You haven't accepted any of my offers of rides recently," Billy pointed out, grinning knowingly.

The blush flooded my face and ran down to my chest. After our near-hookup in the front seat of Billy's Camaro a little under two weeks ago, I hadn't been in Billy's car. We still sat on his car hood every

morning but I refused to be alone with him somewhere that we could easily sneak away in. I knew that the next time we were in the car alone together, it would end just the way it would have the first time, had we not been interrupted by Hopper.

"You and I both know exactly why I haven't accepted," I snapped.

Billy shook his head. "That's not true. We both know what you want but I don't know why you're not willing to go for it."

"Because -"

My voice immediately died as I was about to snap at Billy for the reason why I wasn't planning on sleeping with him. It was partially because Max (who was in the passenger seat) appeared to be listening in, though it didn't look like she understood what we were talking about, it was also because I didn't want Billy to know what was going through my head. I didn't want him to know that I was afraid he would drop me if we hooked up. I scowled and let out a deep breath as I took another route in the argument.

"You're not that great, Hargrove," I told him.

"I'd be happy to prove you wrong," Billy said.

"Too bad you're not going to," I said determinedly, starting to walk off.

Billy shook his head. "Rach, I'm not letting you walk to school. It's going to start pouring. Get in the damn car."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I can walk myself to school."

"In the pouring rain?"

"It's not raining yet," I pointed out. Maybe there was a chance I could make it to school before the rain began. Just as I thought that, though, another loud rumble of thunder sounded. I could see the rain

growing heavier in the distance. There was no way I was going to beat it. I let out a breath of defeat. "Fine."

Billy grinned at me before looking over at Max. "Move," he snapped at his stepsister.

"What? No. She was here first. I'll get in the back," I argued.

My argument fell on deaf ears. Billy shot Max a quick scowl as she hopped over the seats and into the back anyway. "It's fine," Max told me.

"You didn't have to make her do that," I told Billy as I walked to the passenger side.

"She said it was fine," Billy argued.

That was just because she was too afraid to argue with her stepbrother. I sighed and closed the passenger door behind me as I climbed into the car. Billy started back down the road. Not even ten seconds after we'd started driving again, it began pouring. I scowled in annoyance as Billy grinned at me. "Not a word," I snapped at him.

Billy chuckled at my irritation as he continued speeding down the road. It was a quiet ride, much quieter than I normally would have been around him as I was acutely aware of Max's presence. We rode in silence for a while, the radio being the only background noise. I felt a little weird sitting in Billy's car again when the last time we were in here, we had almost slept together. This time we had Max with us. I had to watch what I said around the younger girl. Billy likely wouldn't care what he said even with her around.

For a while, the three of us didn't speak and I became lost in my thoughts. It had been just under two weeks since that night we had nearly hooked up. I hadn't been able to sleep once I had gotten back home. I had been too wrapped up in my thoughts of Billy and what could have happened. I had woken up early the next morning and headed out to the arcade, curious if Billy would be there. As I'd expected, he was. He had stopped and invited me for another ride, which I'd denied, but we had sat on his car hood and walked as we had the weekend before.

Billy had spent a long time teasing me about the night prior. Though I had desperately wanted to hook up with Billy while Max had gotten her hour in the arcade, I had turned down all of his offers. The longer we had spent together, the more stubborn I became about our inevitable future hookup. I was becoming better and better friends with him and I knew that it would hurt even more now if we hooked up and Billy began avoiding me, as he had done with all of his other dates.

As I had said goodbye to Billy once Max's hour at the arcade had run out, I had come extremely close to kissing Billy. He had teased me that I could do it (as he had known what I'd wanted) and I had responded with a curse. His realization that I did like him seemed to have only urged Billy to mess with me even more than he had been before. His hands now rested lower on my back than they had before, he spoke with his breath tickling my throat, and he made sure to pointedly stare at my every curve.

When we had gone back to school on Monday, I had been glad to see that Billy was already in his spot, waiting for me with a cigarette already lit. He had offered to give it to me with the condition that I kissed him. I had smacked his chest and taken the cigarette anyway, taking as deep of a drag from it as I ever had. I continued to get scowls shot at me every day from the girls in school who were furious that Billy and I had continued to flirt but he hadn't pumped the brakes on our relationship yet.

We had continued our regular routines throughout the week. Each morning we would hang out on the hood of Billy's car, we would meet up with each other at lunchtime, and we would hang around the parking lot after school. I noticed as the days dragged on that the two of us had begun deliberately search for each other in the hallways. I no longer remained steely-gazed as I walked through the halls between classes - I now found myself jumping excitedly at the chance to talk to Billy.

Over the first week after our near hookup, I began seeking out Billy more and more often just to talk to him. Sometimes it was because I had gotten a good grade on a test and other days it was because something worth gossiping about had happened. Billy had even agreed to spend our free periods on Thursday afternoons in the

library. Though we did try to study, I constantly felt his hands copping a feel. It had led us to almost getting ourselves kicked out of the library a few times.

The following weekend I had been invited by Billy to come to the arcade. He had asked me to meet him there early Saturday morning and I had immediately agreed. This time I had worn a bright smile as we had walked around the parking lot. Billy had kept his hand in my back pocket the entire time. That was when I had learned a little bit more about him. Getting Billy to open up was a slow process but I knew that I had made a lot more progress with him than anyone else in Hawkins had.

When we had walked together, I had noticed that Billy was open to telling me a little more about California. He had told me about a little café that he had used to go to every Sunday. I noticed him hesitate when he was about to tell me that he went with someone. I assumed that he meant his mother but I chose not to comment on it. He told me about the time when he was a little kid and was thrilled to catch a wave that he had thought was seven feet tall. I had smiled at the childish glee in his voice.

I liked the little things that I'd found out about him during our conversation that day. He didn't like the cold. He, like me, was used to the warmth of a coastal state. He liked driving on the backroads of Hawkins but missed the coastal drives in California. He missed night surfing, something I said sounded frightening but looked fun. Billy insisted that it was the best kind of surfing. Some adrenaline came with the fear of not knowing exactly how high the waves were. That was the beauty of it.

I told him that I felt the same way about my former home. I told him about Casey and our weekly phone calls to catch up with each other and talk about what had been happening in our lives. Billy asked if I ever talked about him. I had rolled my eyes at him, essentially giving him his answer. I told him that I missed the feel of salt water in my hair. I missed my weekend walks in the park with my parents. I missed the huge sleepovers that I would have with my group of friends in my friend Mitchell's sunroom.

It didn't take us long to realize that we both desperately missed our

homes but had found a lot of comfort in each other. I knew that we both reminded each other of our respective homes. The tan on Billy reminded me of the tan I normally had. The sparkle of his blue eyes reminded me of the ocean I'd left behind. It was the reason we both kept coming back to each other. We were each the connection we had to our old lives. We were the two people in Hawkins who understood the other.

On Tuesday of the week after our car escapade, Billy and I had gotten in trouble for our brief interaction after our respective gym classes. I had crawled out of the pool, water dripping off of me as Billy had walked out of the basketball court, shirtless and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. I had walked through the gym to the showers without a towel - which we were supposed to wear when we left the pool - drawing the eyes of most of the guys. Some had whistled, but Billy had been the one to step forward.

I'd stood with a foot popped forward toward Billy. He had placed a hand on mine and gently pulled me into him. I had smiled as water from my hair had dripped onto him, running down his bare chest and arms. Billy had taken my arm without saying a word and had pulled me toward the locker rooms. I knew that neither one of us was thinking of the repercussions that would come from us hooking up. We were stopped, though, when we were yelled at by our respective coaches and Billy had been written up. He had said I would have been worth it.

It was now Thursday. Billy and I had known each other for three weeks now but it felt like we had known each other for about three years. It was probably because we spent so much of our spare time together. It had only been a few minutes that we had been in the car, but I felt weird in the silence. I wanted to talk but I didn't trust what Billy might say in front of his stepsister. Instead, I decided to speak to Max. I hadn't seen any of the girls Billy had brought around try to speak to Max before.

So, I turned back to look at Max. She was fiddling with her skateboard that was resting across her lap. "I've seen you skating before. You're good," I told her.

Max smiled. "Thanks."

"You don't have to talk to her," Billy told me.

"I'd rather talk to her than you," I snapped at him. Max laughed softly as Billy reached over and squeezed my knee painfully. I slapped his arm to make him release me, turning back to Max in the meantime. "Do you know how to do an Ollie?"

"Not yet, I'm still trying to learn it. Are you a skater?" Max asked.

"No, but I had a friend in Florida who loved it. He tried to teach me but I was useless. I could barely go in a straight line without falling," I told her. Max giggled as Billy rolled his eyes. "I've got horrible balance."

"I could teach you," Max offered.

"That could be a long lesson," I said. We both laughed. "If you're willing, though, it could be fun."

Max smiled. "Yeah."

"How long have you been skating?" I asked her.

"For a few years. My mom bought it for me when she and my dad got divorced," Max said.

My eyes shot open. I was a little surprised that Max had mentioned her parent's divorce. "I'm sorry you had to go through a divorce in the family so young, but it's good to know that you got something out of it," I told her honestly.

"I don't think my mom likes that I skate," Max said.

"Ah, who cares what your mom thinks? If you like it, do it," I said. She smiled nervously. "I know the guys in my classes don't like or think that I can be an engineer but I don't care. It may be a little harder to get a job but I know that once I do, I'll be happy."

"Did you ever think that was unrealistic?" Max asked.

"No. But I wanted to be a jellyfish when I was three so I guess unrealistic career goals are kind of my forte," I said.

It was a little surprising to hear both Billy and Max laugh. The sound of their laughter was nice. They sounded almost like real siblings. "You're an idiot," Billy chuckled.

I leaned over and smacked his arm. "Shut up. At least I have fun with my life. Now and when I was little. This place sucks but that doesn't mean we have to stop having fun," I said.

"Didn't I tell you how much fun we could have?" Billy responded.

My face burned as Max stared at us. I hoped that she didn't understand what he was talking about. "Not that much fun," I replied quickly. I ignored Billy's stare and turned back to look at Max with a little smile. "I'd love to take you up on the offer of learning to skate if you're serious, though."

A brilliant smile turned up on her face. "Yeah, definitely," Max said.

Learning to skate could have been something fun to do in Hawkins. "I'll repay the favor but I'm not sure if there's anything I know that you don't - that you'd want to learn, at least," I told her.

Max thought about it for a moment. "Are you good at math?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty good at it."

"How are you with fractions?"

I smiled at her. "Good enough to be confident that I could help you."

"You'd be willing to?" Max asked.

"Sure. I'm already tutoring one of you. May as well work with the other one too," I told her.

Billy lowered his voice as he leaned over to speak to me. "Should I tell her what kind of studying you offer?"

"No!" I snapped. Billy snorted in amusement as he pulled into the school's parking lot. The rain was still coming down outside. Max, Billy, and I shifted to the doors. None of us had an umbrella. We would have to make a run for it. After a moment of hesitation, Max

was the first one to open her door. "See you later, Max."

"Bye, Rachel!" Max called back.

Max threw down her skateboard, slammed closed the car door, and took off toward the middle school. I smiled after her. I sighed as I prepared myself to face the heavy rain. "What do you say we skip school?" Billy offered.

"And what would we do?" I asked him.

"Each other," Billy offered.

His response wasn't surprising. I smirked, leaning into Billy, sitting halfway in his lap. I shifted forward to place my mouth against his ear. "Get your fucking grades up," I snapped.

Billy reached under my thighs and threw me roughly off of himself. I laughed as I plopped into the passenger seat. "Here," Billy offered.

I turned to see that Billy was pulling off his jacket. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Come on," Billy said, nodding for me to follow him.

We jumped out of the car and ran into the heavy rain. It was pouring as Billy and I darted in front of the car. Billy held his leather jacket over my head as we sprinted toward the school. It made me smile. I was glad to see that he was capable of romance, even the little things. We ran under the overhead awnings as we laughed. Some of the students were watching us. The girls were scowling at the vague display of affection between us. Billy pulled his jacket back on as I laughed, shaking out my damp hair.

"Thank you," I told him.

"You're welcome," Billy said.

"Look at you. Almost capable of being kind," I teased, nudging Billy with my hip.

"Oh, come on. I kept you safe from the rain," Billy teased.

I rolled my eyes. "I can deal with a little bit of water, Hargrove."

We walked into school together. I rolled my eyes as Billy threw an arm over my shoulder. It was his way of warning off guys from flirting with me. "I rescued you from a long walk to school," Billy pointed out.

"I should have gone back home," I huffed.

The moment I'd said it, I was met with a senior soccer player named Jason. He had hit on me a few times since I'd arrived in Hawkins. I knew that he was a popular guy and a lot of the girls had crushes on him. "Hey, Rachel," Jason greeted.

"Hi, Jason," I replied.

"Are you doing anything this weekend?" Jason asked.

"Oh, um, I haven't made plans this weekend. I kind of go with the flow," I said.

Truthfully, I was waiting to see if Billy was planning on asking to do something this weekend. "There's a party at Tommy's on Saturday night. His parents are out of town," Jason said. I nodded. Tommy had mentioned it to me earlier in the week and had invited me, as he had with Nancy and Steve too. "Are you going to go?"

"A house party while the parents are out of town... how cliché," I joked, making Jason laugh. "I'm not sure yet, but I'll consider it."

"Save me a dance if you decide to go," Jason said.

"Yeah, sure," I said carelessly.

Jason smiled at me as he walked off. I watched him for a moment before being broken from my train of thoughts by Billy's voice. "Why do you humor them?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We both know you don't want to dance with him."

"Who said that?"

"You don't need to say it, Rach. They bore you. You don't want the star football player or a soccer idiot," Billy said knowingly.

He was right, but that didn't mean that I was going to admit it. "Better than the guy who goes on one date with you, gets what he wants, and then never speaks to you again," I snapped irritably. I wasn't surprised that Billy didn't respond. He grinned at me. "Are you going to the party?"

"If I've got nothing better to do," Billy said noncommittally.

"Meaning Tina?" I hissed.

Billy smirked knowingly. "Would that bother you?"

"You can do whatever the hell you want, Hargrove."

"Like ask Tina to the party?"

"Go for it. I'll go with Jason, as long as that doesn't bother you."

"It won't bother me. We both know he'll bore you stiff."

"And Tina won't bore you?" I asked.

"Nothing with me is boring," Billy teased.

"Well, I'll never find out."

"So you say."

"So I know!" I barked.

Billy laughed as I stormed away in annoyance. Billy followed at a close distance as we walked through the halls together. There were barely two minutes left before the bell rang as we had stopped walking to argue. I headed to my locker with Billy not far behind me. I noticed heads turning to us as we walked. Everyone was curious about what was going on in our relationship. I didn't even know what was happening. I looked back at Billy, wondering why he hadn't left

my side. His locker was on the other side of the school.

"Don't you need to grab your things?" I asked him.

Billy shook his head. "No. I have what I need."

Billy reached into his bag and pulled out the checkered shirt that I had forgotten after our first outing at the arcade. He was holding it over my head with a smirk on his face. I gasped and ripped it from his hands, realizing some people were watching. "I knew you had it," I hissed.

Billy laughed. "Don't get so upset. We both know that's not the last shirt you'll lose to me."

"This is the first and last shirt I'll lose to you, asshole."

"Lying doesn't suit you."

I rolled my eyes, stuffing my shirt into my bag. The bell rang as I did so. I scowled at Billy as I tossed my things into my locker and slammed the door behind me. "Bye, Billy," I growled.

Billy laughed at the annoyance in my voice. "See you later, Rach."

The two of us exchanged a dead stare for a moment before my mouth split into a grin. I wasn't that angry with Billy, though I would have liked to punch him in the face. I was just annoyed that I liked him more than I had been expecting to. I was annoyed that I didn't know how to handle hanging around with someone I was interested in. Billy and I walked in the same direction for a moment before he stopped at the chemistry classroom, winking at me as he walked in. I rolled my eyes again.

The school day passed in much of a blur as they normally did. I liked learning but I didn't like Hawkins High School. I missed my old school. I hung out with Nancy at lunch and explained why my car wasn't in the parking lot. The conversation reminded me that I was going to need to get a new battery so I could drive myself around again. First, I was going to need someone to take me to get one. My father wouldn't be home for hours and I didn't want to install the new battery at night.

I knew exactly who I could get to drive me to the auto parts store. I darted to catch up with Billy, who was heading to the parking lot, at the end of the day. "Hey, Hargrove!" I shouted.

Billy turned back and grinned when he saw me. "What's up, Rach?"

"What are you doing now? Don't say me," I snapped.

"Bringing you to get a new car battery?" Billy offered.

"Okay, not the answer I expected, but you're right," I said, making him laugh. "Do you mind?"

Billy nodded, motioning to his car. "Get in. I have to take Max home first."

"Yeah, no problem. I'm not in a rush," I told him.

We waited at the car for a few minutes for Max to come out from the middle school. She came skateboarding up and smiled when she saw that Billy wasn't alone. She greeted me and hopped in the backseat of the car. The three of us headed to Billy and Max's house first. Max and I stayed locked in conversation throughout the ride. We spoke a little bit about my old life in Florida and Max's in California. I spent some of the drive teaching Max about fractions. She needed some help. Once I saw that she did, I agreed to formally tutor Max.

Once we arrived at Max and Billy's home, I took a good look. It was a reasonably nice house that looked big enough to fit the family comfortably. It wasn't as nice as the house my family lived in, but Billy didn't look bothered by the obvious class difference. I turned back and said goodbye to Max, who thanked me for my help before hopping out of Billy's car and heading inside. Once she had gotten inside safely, Billy turned the car around and headed downtown to the auto parts store.

We headed downtown, talking happily among ourselves, laughing and chatting like we were the oldest of friends. I found myself smiling as we talked. It was something I had found about our conversations; we were able to talk to each other freely and feel like we had been best friends for our entire lives. It was comforting. Billy

and I arrived at the auto parts store after a quick drive and I picked out the new battery immediately. I paid for it quickly and we headed back to my house.

Billy brought me back home, not needing directions as he had remembered my address from when he had dropped me off a couple of weeks ago. "Thanks for the help," I told him as he pulled up to the curb.

"Yeah, sure thing," Billy said.

As I climbed out of the car, I noticed that Billy was shutting off the engine and climbing out after me. "What are you doing?" I asked him.

"I can't leave you to fend for yourself," Billy teased.

"Installing a new car battery? It's not that difficult, Hargrove," I pointed out.

Billy straightened up and pulled his t-shirt over his head, leaving himself bare-chested. He grinned at me as my mouth suddenly went dry. "I'll leave if you want. But I'd be more than happy to help," Billy said.

I bit my lip as I stared at him. "Get started. I'll be right back," I told him. Billy nodded confidently, grabbing the battery and heading to my car. I glanced back as I walked up to my front door. "If you fuck up my car, I'll kill you!"

"I can change a damn battery!" Billy yelled back.

I laughed as I headed inside. I just wanted to change my pants. It was way too hot outside to work in jeans. "Hi, honey," Mom greeted. I smiled at her. "What happened to the car? I noticed it was here all day."

"Oh, the battery died this morning," I told her. "I was going to walk but thankfully someone saw me walking and offered a ride. I've got the replacement. I'm going to go hook it up now."

"I'm sorry to hear that but I'm glad someone gave you a ride. Do you need help?" Mom offered.

"No, I'm good," I told her.

There was no way she was going to go outside and meet Billy. Not while we hadn't figured out what we were. "Okay. Try and hurry! Dinner will be ready in about two hours," Mom said.

"Okay!" I called.

It shouldn't take more than an hour to install the new battery. I darted upstairs and pulled off my pants, tossing my bag onto the bed. I was halfway tempted to go back downstairs like that but I knew my mother would kill me. Instead, I changed into the smallest pair of shorts I owned and swiped on a thick layer of lip gloss before heading back downstairs. I walked outside to see that Billy had already opened my car hood and grabbed some supplies, likely his, to start working. I stood back and watched him work as the sweat glistened on his muscular back.

He looked damn good working. I watched with my arms folded over my chest as Billy leaned into the car, his ass firmly outlined against his tight jeans. "Are you planning on helping at all?" Billy asked.

"No, I've got a perfect view up here," I said.

"Winters -"

Billy straightened up to look at me. His movement stopped when he saw what I was wearing. I saw his throat bob as he swallowed thickly. "Problem?" I asked innocently.

"Not at all," Billy replied.

I walked up to Billy and took the cigarette he was puffing on, taking a deep breath. I left a sticky ring of pink around the end of the cigarette that tasted like cherry. "You sure about that?" I teased teasingly.

I froze as Billy walked up to me. He stole the cigarette from between my lips, his thumb brushing over my bottom one for a moment as he popped it in his mouth. "Hand me the wrench, will you?" Billy asked carelessly.

I scowled, leaning into his toolbox with my back to him. I knew that he was watching me. "Here," I said.

Billy walked up to me and took the wrench from my grasp. I waited for him to walk back over to the car, but he hadn't moved from his position in front of me yet. He was close enough that I could feel the heat coming off his body. Billy placed his fingers on my upper thighs, slowly dragging them upward under the hem of my shorts. I noticed his eyes go wide when his fingers ran underneath the hem and up to my hips, passing where the waistband of my underwear should have been.

"Cat got your tongue?" I asked knowingly.

Billy grabbed the strap of my cropped tank top, yanking me into him. I stumbled, breathing heavily as Billy slid one hand down my bare back and under the hem of my shorts. He rested a hand on my bare backside. "Winters, if you keep on like this -"

"You'll what?" I interrupted, grinning at him.

His response came immediately. "I'll fuck you so hard you won't be able to sit for a week," Billy growled, a warning tone to his voice. My eyes went wide. I had never had someone speak to me the way he did. Billy's eyes glittered. "Cat got your tongue?"

"To hell with the car," I muttered.

Billy laughed as he released me. My heart was hammering in my chest as I watched him. I was a little surprised that he stepped back from me and went right back to work. I didn't know how he could do it. I was still flustered, even as we began working. Billy loosened the bolt and used the terminal puller to remove the cable and terminal from the negative and positive terminal. We then removed the clamp holding the battery in place and set the parts and fasteners aside.

"Okay, do you want to pull the battery out?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," I said.

Billy stepped back and allowed me enough room to reach into the hood and wrap my hands around the old battery. I was well aware

that leaning forward as much as I had was pulling the daisy dukes up my thighs even higher than they already had been. I wasn't surprised to feel Billy's jeans against my bare legs after a few moments. He was standing directly behind me and wasn't making any effort to try and hide just how interested he was in me. I could feel his interest pressed against my back.

"Hand me the new battery, will you?" I asked.

My voice quivered slightly as I spoke. I blushed, embarrassed, and angry with myself for not acting a little steadier around him. Judging by the puff of air I felt against my neck, he was laughing at my obvious embarrassment. I wished that I could have better control of myself around Billy, but I didn't. My control was lessening every day. It was how I knew that we would sleep together one day. It wasn't going to be much longer at this point. Neither one of us had any control when it came to the other.

"Here's the new one," Billy said.

"Thanks," I said, grabbing the new battery from him and setting it in place.

"I'll hook it up," Billy offered.

"Okay."

Once I was sure the battery wouldn't fall out of place, I stepped back. I smirked at Billy as we hung over the edge of my car. Billy had his head underneath the hood, hooking the new battery up. It wasn't a difficult task and I could have easily done it myself, but in the back of my mind, I knew that it was more time we could spend together. I wasn't going to complain about it. I watched Billy work for a moment, staring at him in silence, but I jumped when the front door opened and my mother walked out. Her eyes shot to Billy.

"Oh," Mom muttered. My face burned red at our appearances as Billy leaned up from his work. He grinned at my mother. "I didn't know you had a friend with you."

"'Friend' is a loose term," I muttered.

"Rachel!" Mom snapped.

Billy nudged my hip gently, wiping the grease off of his hands with a towel. "You must be Mrs. Winters," he said.

My mother smiled as she reached out to shake his hand. "I am, and you are?"

"Billy. Billy Hargrove."

Her eyes twinkled as she sent me a glance. I blushed. "Well, Billy, would you like some tea?" she offered.

"That would be nice, thank you," Billy said. Mom smiled and nodded, walking back into the house. Billy sent me a teasing smirk. "Your mother is lovely."

"Shut up," I snapped, leaning against the side of the hood as Billy went back to work finishing up hooking up the new battery. Once he was done, he leaned up to look at me. "What?"

Billy was chuckling. "Come here. You've got something..."

What did I have on my face? I raised my eyebrows as Billy stepped into me again. This time was a little more innocent. I felt him place a hand on my chin and swipe down, holding my face to stay even with his. His finger brought away some grease. I didn't blush this time as we stared at each other. My heart was fluttering faster than a mockingbird's wings, though. I started leaning into Billy, not thinking of the consequences of a kiss when the front door opened. I jumped back from him.

"Here you go. Hope you like sweet tea, Billy," Mom said, handing us both our glasses.

"Sweet tea?" Billy asked.

He looked confused. "We're in Indiana! I know they have sweet tea here," I told him.

"Well, not in California," Mom pointed out. "Sweet tea is a Southern and Midwestern drink."

"Shameful," I huffed.

"Try it. I'll get you something else if you like," Mom told Billy.

Billy took the drink and downed a long sip. His eyes went wide at the taste but a moment later he grinned. "It's good. Thank you," Billy told her.

I smiled. "Glad you like it. Have fun, kids!"

Billy lowered his voice, sliding a hand around my waist. "Don't worry, we will."

"You have to finish what you started," I whispered back.

Billy rested his hand on my thigh and said, "With pleasure."

There was no doubt that it would please him. It would please me, too. A lump formed in my throat that I forced down as I looked at Billy. I was so close to sleeping with him. It was all that I'd wanted since meeting him, but I was too damn stubborn. I didn't want to lose the very comforting friendship that we had formed over the last few weeks. We sipped our drinks together and chatted amicably as we finished hooking up the battery. I wished that it would have taken longer so he didn't have to leave.

"By the way, how does she know I'm from California?" Billy asked.

"I complain about you," I muttered.

In reality, she had likely overheard me talking about Billy to Casey during one of our phone calls. Billy laughed, knowing that I was lying to him. I turned back with my hose in hand, washing some of the leftover grease and oil from the battery exchange off the front of my car as Billy cleaned up the parts behind me. I was halfway tempted to leave things be, but I knew that I couldn't. So, I turned back and sprayed Billy in the ass with the hose. He jumped in surprise and turned back to me with a scowl. I smiled, having a hard time not laughing.

"What? I thought you said you missed the water," I said innocently.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Billy asked warningly.

"What are you going to do about it, Hargrove?" I teased.

It didn't take me longer than a few seconds to realize what I was getting myself into. I squealed in surprise when I realized that Billy was going to come after me. I sprayed him in the face as I darted off. Billy was laughing as he chased me into my front yard. He was already soaking wet but I wasn't going to stop. I turned back and sprayed him in the chest and pants again as he gained on me. I had forgotten how fast he was. I was a strong swimmer but I had never been a particularly fast runner.

Billy managed to catch me in seconds. He wrapped an arm around my waist and brought me down into the grass. I laughed hysterically as he sat on my legs, snatching the hose from my hands and spraying me in the chest and face. I shrieked with childish laughter as Billy slipped the hose up my shirt to drench my top half. He was pressing most of his weight against my legs as I tried to shimmy out of his grasp. It took me half a minute but I eventually did. He caught me again as I ran toward the street.

Billy caught me in his arms and held the hose over my head, keeping me in place while holding an arm around my waist, soaking me. We were both laughing like maniacs. "No, no! Billy, stop! Stop!" I shrieked, trying to push off of him.

"Billy!"

That wasn't me. The two of us shot apart and Billy turned the hose off. He still had an arm around my waist. His laughter ceased instantly. The smile was wiped off of my face when I noticed the tenseness in Billy's stance. "Hey, dad," Billy said tersely.

He was speaking to the driver of a beige station wagon. It was his father and stepmother. "Where the hell is Max?" Neil asked.

"I dropped her off at home," Billy told his father.

Neil's eyes tracked to me for a moment. I felt Billy's hands tighten on my waist, almost painfully. "To have a water fight with some -?"

"Her car battery was dead," Billy interrupted. I jumped in surprise from the nastiness in Billy's voice. He knew as well as I did that his father was about to call me a whore. "I was helping her change it."

"Go home and keep an eye on Max as I told you to do," Neil demanded.

Neil Hargrove's voice was filled with animosity. I couldn't believe he was speaking that way to his son. Susan remained silent, staring at the car floor. I looked between the father-son pair awkwardly. I didn't know if I should have stepped forward and introduced myself or remain silent. Eventually, Neil drove off in the opposite direction of Billy's house. I turned to Billy, still not pulling out of his grasp, unsure of what I should say. I knew that he was both too embarrassed and angry. There was only one thing I could do.

There was a chance I could try to lighten the mood. "Well, look at that. You finally managed to get me wet, Hargrove," I teased.

Billy laughed appreciatively. "Is it the first time?" Billy asked disbelievingly.

"Get out," I snapped. The two of us stared at each other awkwardly for a moment as I smiled at him. "Thanks for this. I had fun."

"Me too," Billy admitted. He smirked at me. "Also, you have no idea how wet -"

"No!" I snapped, pushing a hand over his mouth.

Billy laughed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," I told him. I turned around and bent over to grab the hose from its place on the ground. As I did so, I felt Billy slap my ass roughly. I whipped around but Billy was already halfway to his car. "Hargrove!"

"Goodnight, Rach," Billy called.

"Asshole!" I yelled after him.

The second I saw him tomorrow morning, I was going to punch him

in the face. Billy turned back as he hopped in his car and winked at me, running his tongue over his teeth flirtatiously. I bit my lip for a moment, forcing myself to turn away before I did something stupid. As Billy drove off, I rolled up the hose and began putting away my supplies. Once I was done, I started the car engine for a moment to ensure that the battery was working before turning it off and heading inside.

Mom glanced up from her spot in the kitchen and immediately noticed that I was soaking wet. "Should I ask?"

"No," I said, blushing. "Can I have a towel?"

My mother laughed and handed me a towel from the laundry basket. I laughed awkwardly, wrapping it around my chest. "Your friend Billy is quite handsome," Mom said.

"Mom -"

"Don't 'mom' me," she teased. I smiled at her. "That's the friend you've been out with lately?"

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"I see why," Mom joked. "Is this a friendship or..."

She knew me well enough to know where my head was at with Billy. "I'm not entirely sure. I think it's a friendship that could maybe turn into something more," I admitted.

"Judging from what I saw out there, it's already something more," Mom teased.

"Oh, how much did you see?" I asked, feeling incredibly awkward.

"Enough to know that you should be happy your father isn't home."

"On that note, I'm going to get ready for dinner."

There was no need to ever have that conversation. There was no way I was going to tell her about my near-hookup with Billy. "Cute shorts, by the way. I liked them even more when you bought them when you

were seven," Mom called after me.

"Mom!" I shouted.

She was laughing as I headed to my room. "I'm old, not blind."

It was a good thing that my mother was as understanding about things as she was. Otherwise, I would have been in a ton of trouble for the way I had just interacted with Billy. I was lucky that my mother had never been judgmental about my relations with the opposite gender and she knew a lot of what I'd done. When I finally went to sleep later that night, it was a restless one. I dreamed of Billy, our water fight, and what might have happened had we not been interrupted.

The next morning I dressed in tight-fitting acid-washed jeans, an off-the-shoulder white long-sleeved shirt, and a pair of beat-up boots. My mother gave me a pointed stare; she knew that I had worn the shirt because the back was mostly open. I blushed at her stare. I ate quickly and jumped up, heading to school before Mom said something that alerted Dad to what was going on. I headed to school early and was pleased to see that Billy was already sitting on the hood of his car, waiting for me. I hopped out of the car and headed to him.

"Good morning," I greeted him.

Billy smirked. "Morning."

Billy threw an arm over my shoulder as we walked into the school. His fingers were draping over my shoulders, gently running over the bone. I swallowed thickly as they moved onto my collarbone. I glanced over after a moment and noticed that there were marks on his knuckles. I stared at his hand with my eyebrows knitted. They were beginning to scab over but the marks were fresh. I took Billy's hand in mine and turned it over to get a better look at the healing cuts and bruises.

"What the hell is this?" I asked him.

"Nothing," Billy said, pulling his hand out of my grasp.

"Nothing?" I asked disbelievingly. "It looks like you got in a fight with the wall."

"Leave it alone, Rach," Billy said.

It would have been impossible to miss the warning edge in Billy's voice. I wanted to keep pushing but I knew that it wasn't the right moment. He wasn't himself today. I had already noticed this morning that he was quieter than usual. Typically Billy ran his mouth all morning long. He didn't stop until we had to go to class. Today he seemed to be far less willing to tease or even talk to me. So, I swallowed my curiosity and reached up to his draped hand and linked my fingers with his. I noticed the smile on his face appear as I did so.

We walked together for a moment before I spoke again. "You know, I could use some help with a radiator tune-up," I told him.

Billy smiled, pressing a kiss against my temple. "Just let me know when."

"I'm sorry if I got you in trouble yesterday," I said.

Billy waved off my concern. "I'm always in trouble."

A lump formed in my throat. "Still -"

"You're worth it, Rach," Billy interrupted.

My heart gave a pathetic flutter at the kindness in his voice. It wasn't something I'd heard before now. A large smile turned up on my mouth as I briefly laid a hand on his stomach. I liked it when Billy was like this. It made me feel like maybe I could have trusted him when he told me that he wouldn't leave me hanging once we hooked up. I felt like I might have been making some real progress with him. Of course, just as I thought that Billy put us right back to square one.

"So, who gets to play guy-with-no-future today?"

The smile that had been on my face dropped off as I scowled at them. "What makes you think I'm not looking for something long-term?" I huffed.

Billy smirked. "Call it a hunch."

There was the Billy I had come to know so well. I yanked myself out of his grasp irritably. "Half of the guys in Hawkins who have asked me out would make perfectly good dates," I told him.

"Why haven't you accepted any of their offers, then?" Billy asked.

"Do you think Julie Andrews even considers a project without an offer on the table?" I replied evenly.

"Have you deluded yourself into thinking that's why you keep declining their offers?"

"What other reason would there be, Hargrove?"

"We both know why you keep saying no."

"Because you're an arrogant prick?" I offered.

"You'd just be wasting their time," Billy corrected.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

How highly Billy thought of himself had annoyed me since day one. I was perfectly capable of going out with someone other than him and I was going to prove it. "Mark!" I chirped, spotting him at the end of the hallway.

I ran up to him with a brilliant smile on my face. "Hey, Rachel," Mark greeted.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked him loudly.

"Uh, I don't have plans yet," Mark said.

"Want to ask me out?" I offered.

Mark smiled. "Are you going to say yes this time?"

"It's worth a shot," I told him. Mark smiled and shook his head. "Come

on, third time's the charm."

"I think this is the fifth time," Mark pointed out. I smiled and nodded for him to keep talking. "Rachel, will you go out with me tonight?"

"Wow, I thought you'd never ask," I teased, running my hands through my hair.

Mark laughed. "I'll pick you up at eight?"

"Yeah. You know where the Wheeler's live?"

"Yeah."

"I'm next door. You'll see my car."

"Great. I'll see you tonight."

"See you tonight," I told him.

It was as easy as I had expected it to be. I'd known that Mark had wanted to go out with me since we'd met. I was positive that it would be a nice night and if it made Billy a little jealous, it would be even better. I gave Mark a little wink and waved him off. Once he had turned around the corner, I turned back to Billy with a smirk. I was surprised to see that he didn't look angry. He didn't have any hint of emotion on his face. I walked up to him slowly, wondering if he was upset with me.

When he opened his mouth to speak, I realized immediately that he was. "Enjoy your date."

"What's your problem?" I asked.

"Nothing, Rachel," Billy said.

"Really?" I asked.

"Really. I'm happy for you. You got exactly what you wanted," Billy deadpanned.

What the hell had just happened? I only wanted to make him a little

jealous as he had done to me plenty of times before. Billy scowled at me for a moment before turning to walk off. I couldn't even bring myself to call his name. I was too stunned at the turn of events. I had thought that Billy would tease me that I wouldn't have fun on my date. I hadn't expected him to be angry, which he was. I almost went running after him to ask what had happened when I was sidelined by the bell.

The first half of the day went by without me comprehending anything that was taught in my early classes. I was lost in thought throughout the day, wondering what had happened with Billy. I was just messing with him, the way he had done with me so many times before. Why was he suddenly so angry with me? I had accepted one offer of a date. He had been on plenty of dates in his first few weeks at Hawkins High School. His reaction didn't make sense to me.

It wasn't lost on me that Billy didn't talk to me at lunch. Normally, he would have come up to mess with me in the lunch line. He didn't even look at me during lunch. The only time he glanced away from his friends was when Mark had come up to me to ask if I was okay with going out to dinner. I had agreed quickly. As Mark walked off back to the other football players, I caught Billy scowling at my date. He only looked away when he realized that I was watching him.

Even in the hours that followed lunch, Billy didn't speak to me or look at me. It occurred to me during our respective gym classes that Billy was much rougher while playing basketball that afternoon. I tried to head Billy off as the bell rang but I was too slow. I didn't even get a chance to see him. He was peeling out of the parking lot as I'd walked outside. I knew that he had left as quickly as he had to try and avoid me. I let out a deep breath as I climbed into my car, slamming the door shut behind me in frustration.

When I arrived back home, I briefly considered running upstairs and taking a long nap until it was time for my date with Mark. As much as I wanted to hide from the world, though, I knew that I needed to talk to someone. I needed to have some serious girl talk. I turned the car engine off and immediately walked over to Nancy's house. I banged on the door for a moment, waiting for an answer. Her mother appeared but was quickly replaced by Nancy. She gasped in surprise as I grabbed her arm and yanked her across the yard into my house.

"Hi, girls," Mom said.

"Hi, Mrs. Winters," Nancy said.

"How was school?" Mom asked.

"It was great," I deadpanned. Mom's eyebrows furrowed. She knew from the tone of my voice that something was wrong. "Nancy's helping me get ready for a date."

"Oh, with Billy?" Mom asked.

"No," I snapped a little harsher than I'd meant to. "His name's Mark. He's a football player."

"Oh, okay," Mom said, backing down as she realized how annoyed I was. "Let me know if you need anything."

"I will. Thanks, Mom," I said, softer this time.

She nodded at me as I took Nancy's arm and brought her upstairs. We headed into my room and I closed the door behind me. "You're going to go out with Mark?" Nancy asked disbelievingly.

"I guess," I mumbled.

"You don't sound thrilled about that," Nancy pointed out.

"It's something to do," I said, shrugging.

Nancy sighed, pulling me onto the bed. "Rachel, what happened? You haven't been interested in Mark at all since school started and now you're going on a date with him. Come on, I won't judge," she promised.

"It was stupid," I mumbled.

"Tell me," Nancy goaded. I sighed and laid back on the sheets as I recounted the story of how I had ended up accepting a date with Mark. "Wow..."

"Well that's unhelpful," I growled.

Nancy laughed. "You're probably not going to like my answer."

"Why?"

"Did it ever occur to you that you might have hurt him?"

How the hell could I have hurt him? "What?" I sneered, annoyed with her insinuation. "It's Billy Hargrove; he's not going to be upset just because some girl turned him down."

Nancy was shaking her head. "That's not what I mean. I doubt being turned down bothers him that much; he's got a line of girls ready and waiting to accept a date." I scowled at her comment. We both knew how many girls would have liked to go out with him. "I think it's that you jumped at the chance to throw a date in his face."

How was that fair? He had done the same thing to me. "He's thrown dates in my face since we met."

"Do you remember the last time Billy went on a date? Not just teased you about one he had been on. When was the last time he went on a date?" Nancy asked.

My immediate response was that it had only been a few days ago, but I knew that I was wrong. I had to stop and think about it. He hadn't been on a date since the beginning of last week, just a few days after he had begun opening up and talking to me about California. "It's been at least a week and a half," I admitted.

"Do you think Billy could have easily gotten a date since then if he'd wanted?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah," I told her. Billy didn't even have to work to get dates. "It doesn't matter. He hasn't been going on dates because he's bored with the girls here."

"That's not it."

"Sure it is."

"No, it's not," Nancy countered. "It's because he has feelings for you and you know it."

"No, he doesn't."

He liked the way I looked but there was no way that he had any form of feelings for me. "Are you kidding? You're the only person in school he's talked to about California. You spend every Saturday morning together and I know you both look for each other every chance you get in the halls," Nancy pointed out.

"We entertain each other. We both think the other one's hot. We want to hook up. That's it," I reasoned.

"Maybe that's the way it started. Can you look me in the eye and tell me you don't have feelings for him?" Nancy asked.

I wouldn't even try that. "No."

"You want my honest opinion?" Nancy asked.

"Not really, but I could probably use it."

Someone had to tell me the truth because I was positive that I wouldn't come across it on my own. "As annoying as Billy has been and as much as he's messed with you, he's never asked out another girl right in front of you," Nancy pointed out. My heart dropped. She was right. "He's flirted with them, sure, but he's never asked them out with you in earshot."

"You're convinced I hurt him?" I asked her awkwardly.

"I am."

"Whatever. If I went out and slept with him, he would end up hurting me."

"You don't know that."

"I know guys like Billy. He would."

"So, instead of giving it a fair shot you two go out of your way to make the other jealous?" Nancy asked.

"Seems that way," I muttered.

My answer set Nancy off. "Why the hell are the two of you so stubborn? You like each other!" she shouted, smacking me on the shoulder. "Normal people would just go on a date."

"Can we do the lecture later?" I moaned, throwing my head back. Nancy was about to snap at me when I spoke over her. "I know I deserve one! I made a date with Mark that I now realize was a massive mistake but it's too late to cancel."

Nancy sighed but nodded. "Come on, let's see what we can do with you."

"Thanks, Nance. Sorry if I was being an ass," I muttered.

"It's okay. We've all been assholes sometimes," she said. I laughed. "Make it up to me by apologizing to Billy tomorrow."

"Yeah, I will," I promised.

There was no way I could wait until we went back to school on Monday to apologize to Billy. I owed him a massive apology and I knew it. Hell, I owed Mark an apology too and we hadn't even gone out yet. Nancy and I spent the next few hours bouncing around ideas regarding the rough state of my relationship with Billy. Nancy told me that the best idea was to go to Billy in the morning and admit that I was wrong. I hated apologizing to anyone, but I knew that I owed it to Billy.

Once she was positive that I was going to apologize to Billy in the morning, Nancy began helping me get ready for the date. I ended up going with a short red ruffled skirt that I hadn't worn since my mother had bought it for me months ago and a white scoop neck shirt that I had always loved wearing back in Florida. I paired the casual outfit with some older white sandals. I wasn't planning on trying to impress Mark that much, and the knowledge made me feel that much worse about my actions.

"Well, you look nice," Nancy said.

"Thanks, Nance. Sorry for being an ass," I said.

Nancy shook her head. "You're not. You just realized that you felt

something more for Billy than you were expecting."

I rolled my eyes, throwing my head back. "God, he drives me insane."

Why couldn't I like a normal and boring guy like Mark? "I know," Nancy said, looking at her wristwatch. "You're about to go out with Mark so you may as well try and enjoy your night."

"Yeah. One dinner date won't be too painful," I said hopefully.

"Exactly. Come on," Nancy said, pulling me to my feet. "Mark should be here any minute."

"Let's go," I said. Nancy and I walked downstairs. My parents glanced up as they noticed us coming downstairs. "Goodnight, guys!"

"You look nice," Mom said.

"Thanks," I told her.

"Is he here?" Dad asked.

"He'll be here soon," I said.

"Have a good night. Don't be afraid to punch him if he gets a little handsy," Dad said.

It was the same warning he had given me every time before I went on a date since I was thirteen. Nancy and I laughed. "Thanks for the advice. See you later!" I yelled at my parents.

"Goodnight!" they yelled after us.

"Goodnight, Mr., and Mrs. Winters!" Nancy called.

"Goodnight, Nancy!" they yelled after her.

We headed outside and I threw my head back, relishing in the cool air. I needed a little breath of fresh air. "Tell me about the date tomorrow?" Nancy asked.

"Definitely. See you tomorrow," I told her.

We exchanged a long hug as Nancy wished me good luck on the date and headed back to her house. I was only left waiting in the driveway for a few minutes before Mark pulled up - he was exactly one minute early. I smiled and waved at Mark as I walked into the street. He was in a nice button-down shirt (buttoned up three more than Billy would have had his) and slacks. He was driving a 1982 Honda Accord. I walked to the passenger side and threw myself into the car.

"Hi," I greeted Mark.

"Hey. You look beautiful," Mark said.

"Thank you. You're not too bad yourself," I tried to joke. It wasn't completely heartfelt, but it went over Mark's head as he smiled at me.

"So, what are we doing?"

"There's a nice restaurant downtown I figured we could head to," Mark said.

"Works for me."

Mark threw the car into drive and started down the road. His radio was playing 'Love Somebody' by Rick Springfield. It wasn't my kind of music. "I'm really glad you decided to ask me out. Well, you asked me to ask you out," Mark corrected himself.

I laughed. "Guys don't usually like when you make the first move."

"I thought it was pretty cool," Mark said.

"Thanks."

"You're not like the rest of the girls in Hawkins," Mark commented.

"I'm different. It's a gift," I teased, throwing my hair haughtily over my shoulders.

Mark laughed. "I like it."

"So, how's football been going?" I asked, desperate to get lost in conversation.

Mark spent most of the ride talking to me about football. He told me that football was the one thing he had always been good at. He was always a kid who loved to play sports and football was the sport he'd done the best with. His father had been thrilled that he was a football player as he had been one himself in his youth but had been sidelined by an injury. Mark was hoping to go to Indiana State University and major in physical therapy. I admitted that I did like that he had a plan for the future.

During our conversation, I told Mark a bit about my plans. I told him that I was always in the water but had never been a good enough swimmer to go professional. I had always liked watching my father work on his engineering projects and decided that I'd wanted to do it too. Mark told me that it would be hard (which I already knew) but he believed that I was smart enough for it. He asked if I wanted to go to college in Indiana but I said that I wanted to go to the University of South Florida, which was near my hometown.

We arrived at a nice Italian restaurant downtown and walked inside, hand-in-hand. I hated that I was wondering if Billy would bring me on a similar date. I wasn't completely myself tonight as I still felt guilty about this morning and what was said between us. I tried to shift my focus to the date and our conversation as we took a seat. We talked a lot about our childhoods and families. I told him that I was an only child and about my parents' careers. I did keep up the lie about why we had moved to Indiana.

Mark told me a lot about his life. Hawkins was the only place he had ever lived. He wanted to live somewhere bigger, though. He had a younger brother who was taking after him as a college player and an older sister who was in her last year of college where she was studying to be an elementary school teacher. His parents were divorced, though the split had been amicable. I noticed that Mark spoke very highly of his family whereas Billy was almost silent about his.

As we sat together, we chatted and laughed. I was having a perfectly nice time on the date. Our time together was light. It wasn't like my time with Billy, which was filled with tenseness and anticipation. But that was part of the excitement. I forced myself to enjoy the meal and talk to Mark like we were a normal couple. We laughed about the

teachers we didn't like and exchanged stories about other students. I learned that Mark didn't like Tommy either but would go to his party. I told him that I wasn't sure if I would yet.

Until now I had been planning on going with Billy... Or spending most of my time flirting with Billy, at least. I couldn't get the Californian out of my head, no matter how hard I tried. I kept floating back to thoughts about him. Mark was sweet at the end of the date and offered to pay as we finished our dinner. He even offered to get us dessert but I had insisted that I was full. The truth was that I didn't want him to spend any more of his money on me. So, he paid and rose from his seat, extending his hand to me.

We headed outside with Mark's arm around my upper back. I wished that he would have held me the way that Billy did. It would have added a little more excitement. As the date ended, I found myself struggling with what to say to him. I couldn't keep leading him on. There was nothing wrong with the date. It was a perfectly nice night, but there was one massive problem. I was bored. Mark was incredibly nice but he wasn't my type. I had meant it the day I'd met him and I meant it today.

My voice died on my tongue as we stood outside of his car. "I'm really glad you decided to come out tonight," Mark told me.

"Yeah. Thanks for taking me out. I had a good time," I said.

Mark smiled at me as my stomach churned. This time it wasn't from nerves or because I was attracted to the guy in front of me. It was because I knew what was coming. Mark leaned into me and I was too stupefied to stop it. Mark pressed his lips against mine. I tried to kiss him back (or even push him away) but I couldn't bring myself to do anything. I stood there like an idiot and didn't respond to the kiss. Mark remained there for a moment before backing away. I tried to smile at him but was stopped by the look on his face.

"Can I ask you something?" Mark asked.

"Sure," I said.

"Why did you suddenly decide you wanted to go out?"

"Oh..." My voice died. Judging by the look on Mark's face, my less-than-enthusiastic reaction to his kiss had tipped him off to what was going on. "You had asked me out so many times and I didn't give you a fair shot. I was being stubborn. I guess I thought about it and I thought it would be nice to go out and see if there was anything here."

"Really? It's not because you wanted to throw someone in Hargrove's face?" Mark asked knowingly.

Shit. "What?" I asked stupidly.

It was too late to backtrack and give him a real reason that I had asked him out. "I'm not an idiot, Rachel. I was surprised that you had asked me to ask you out. Your one-eighty didn't make sense to me but I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. I thought that was the truth, but after tonight I realized that I was right. You didn't want to go out with me. You wanted to make him jealous," Mark said.

It would have been impossible to miss the hurt under the anger in his voice. He was right. All I could do was pray that he would accept my apology. "Mark -"

"Tell me the truth," Mark snapped.

He deserved that much. "You're right," I admitted.

Mark nodded. "I know, and I should have known this was why you were so eager to go out."

What could I say now except the obvious? "I - I... I'm really -"

"Come on, I'll take you home," Mark interrupted my pathetic apology.

There was no way I could let him leave without a proper apology. "Wait for a second," I said, gripping onto Mark's shirt sleeve to stop him. "Please, let me explain."

Mark shook his head, gently pushing me off. "You don't need to explain anything to me, Rachel. I get what happened."

"Of course, but I need to apologize," I said desperately.

"Do you feel bad that you did it or do you feel bad because you got caught?" Mark snapped.

My stomach sank to the floor. I hated the realization that he was right. I felt bad for hurting Mark, but I felt worse because I'd been caught. I had wanted to let him down easily. "No, Mark, I shouldn't have asked you out. You're right. I have feelings for Billy and I asked you out because I thought it would bother him. It wasn't right to drag you into it," I told him.

Mark nodded slowly. "It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier."

"Wait, Mark -"

"Come on. I have a curfew to make," Mark said.

It would be before eleven by the time Mark got home. He wasn't at risk of missing his curfew, he just wanted me gone. Feeling horrible about myself and what I'd done, Mark and I climbed into his car. I felt like such an ass. I wanted to be angry with Billy but I didn't have that right. It was my fault. I had now made both of them furious with me. I had fought with people and occasionally said or done some hurtful things, but I had never done anything like this before. I couldn't believe I had. I owed Mark the biggest apology of my life.

The ride back to my house was silent. Even as Mark stopped his car in front of my driveway, I didn't know what to say. "I'm so sorry, Mark," I said, just wanting him to forgive me.

"Goodnight, Rachel," Mark said noncommittally.

"Can I please say something?" I asked before getting out of the car. Mark stared at me but didn't shake his head that I couldn't. "Mark, I'm sorry. You didn't deserve what I did."

Mark took a deep breath as he shifted in his seat to look at me. "Your friendship with Hargrove never made sense to me when I first met you," Mark said. I nodded. On the surface, we didn't seem that similar. "I get it now. I see why the two of you are so close. You're the same kinds of people. Neither one of you cares about who you hurt as long as you're happy."

His words were hurtful, but they weren't anything I didn't deserve. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Trust me when I tell you that I'm not happy at all, but it's not about me. I used you and you don't deserve it," I said quietly.

"Thanks for admitting it," Mark said coldly.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"Goodnight," Mark replied.

My face was burning with embarrassment as Mark nodded for me to get out of his car. He drove off without looking back. I felt like both an asshole and an idiot as I walked inside. "Honey! You're home early," Mom commented.

She and Dad were curled up on the couch. "Yeah," I said tonelessly.

"How was the date?" Mom asked.

"It was fine," I said. I had to get out of here quickly. I could feel my throat tightening with the threat of tears. "Mark had a curfew to get home for."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Dad asked worriedly.

"Yeah. I'm okay. I'm going to go to bed," I said quietly.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Mom said gently.

"We love you," Dad added.

"Love you guys too," I whispered.

Thankfully, they allowed me to go upstairs without another word. I knew they were aware that something had gone wrong but they weren't going to ask me about it. I wandered into my bedroom and closed the door behind me. I walked to my bed and dropped without changing or taking off my makeup. I curled onto my side and threw a blanket over myself. I turned to the window and swallowed a thick lump in my throat. I had been such an ass. Both Billy and Mark had every right to never speak to me again.

When the sun rose the next morning I was still exhausted. I hadn't slept well. I had been thinking about Billy, Mark, and Nancy's words all night. I knew I'd hurt Mark but now I realized that I'd hurt Billy too, something I didn't think was possible. It was all because I'd wanted to prove myself capable of being with someone other than him. I knew that I was in the wrong. Billy hadn't been out with any other girls since we had started our quasi-relationship. I was the one who owed him an apology. First Billy, then Mark.

Once I'd gotten downstairs, Mom looked up at me. She was cooking pancakes, which was one of my favorite breakfasts. "Morning, honey. Breakfast?" Mom offered gently.

"You know, I think I'm going to go out for breakfast," I said suddenly.

"Did Mark ask you for breakfast?" Mom asked carefully.

"No, but I have someone else I need to talk to," I told her.

Mom put her spatula on the counter and walked over, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. "If you want to talk about what happened last night, I'm always here," she offered.

"Depending on how this morning goes," I teased.

She wrapped her arms around my shoulders to hug me tightly, pressing a kiss into my temple. "Good luck," Mom whispered.

I'd thrown on a pair of daisy dukes and a tight white tank top this morning. I scrunched my hair, too. Billy may not have normally accepted my apology so I was going to have to bring out the big guns. I hopped in the car and sped down the road toward the arcade. I could only hope that Billy was planning on bringing Max to the arcade this morning. I arrived at the arcade in a few minutes and parked. I hopped out of the car and headed toward the entrance. This was about the time he'd gotten here the past few Saturdays.

Pushing my sunglasses onto the top of my head, I walked up to the arcade entrance and leaned against the pillar out front. I wasn't left waiting and wondering if the pair would show up for long. Billy's Camaro came screaming up along the road and Max jumped out, in

the middle of an argument with her stepbrother. Max didn't even notice that I was standing out front as she blew into the arcade. Billy did, though. He was about to take off but stopped as he was in front of me. He rolled down the window and lowered his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

I smiled at him with her foot propped against the pillar. "Want to go for a ride?" I offered happily.

Half of me was expecting him to turn down my offer. Billy shook his head with a reluctant grin on his face. "Get in," Billy told me, throwing his head toward the passenger side.

Once I was sure that he wasn't going to drive off if I made a move, I pushed off of the pillar and darted over to his car. I ran around the side of the car and hopped into the passenger seat, closing the door behind me. Billy barely spared me a glance as we took off through the arcade parking lot. I didn't know where we were going and I wasn't going to question it. I was too busy thinking about how to start my apology and how to make it sound genuine. Thankfully, Billy did it for me.

"How was the date?" Billy asked.

"It was okay," I muttered dumbly.

"Just okay?" Billy asked.

He sounded surprised. "Yeah."

"Are you going out with him again?"

"No, I don't think so. Mark's nice but he's not my type."

"Who is your type?"

You are. "Assholes, apparently," I said. Billy smirked at my admission. He knew what I meant. "But I'm no better." Billy glanced up briefly as we drove through the backroads. "You were right. I agreed to go out with Mark because I thought it would bother you, and in doing so, I hurt Mark who's been nothing but nice to me, and... I don't know what happened on this side."

"He'll forgive you," Billy said.

Apologizing to Mark would be the first thing I did at school on Monday. He wasn't getting away until he listened to me. I nodded mutely at Billy's answer. I knew that Mark would likely forgive me in time, but I still felt awful. "What about you?" I asked.

"You don't have anything to feel bad for," Billy said.

"You're not even a little upset with me?" I asked, shocked.

He had seemed extremely upset with me yesterday. "Why should I be?" Billy asked. I raised an eyebrow. I didn't understand why he wasn't upset with me. "You spent your entire date thinking about me."

"I did not spend the entire date thinking about you," I snapped.

"No? What about when he kissed you? Was he the one you wanted doing it?" Billy asked knowingly.

No. He was always so cocky. I wasn't ready to let him know that I had spent a lot of the night wondering what a kiss with Billy would have been like. "What about you, Hargrove? When you were with those other girls, were you thinking about them? Did you come close to ever letting the wrong name slip out?" I teased.

"Come close?" Billy asked, glancing at me. "Why do you think Tina doesn't like you?"

It was good to know that Billy wasn't just a jerk with me. I barked out a loud laugh as I smacked Billy's thigh roughly. He was laughing too. I wondered for a moment if he was telling me the truth. It didn't look like he was exaggerating. I hadn't liked Tina since we had met, but I did feel a little bad that Billy must have called my name when the two of them were together. I would have been both mortified and furious if a guy ever did that to me. It did send a shiver up my spine when I realized that he wasn't messing with me. He had called her by my name.

"I don't get how that makes her hate me and not you," I muttered irritably. Billy laughed at me. We remained in silence for a moment

before I turned a heated glare on him. "Also, how dare you?"

"What?" Billy asked.

"How dare you think that I would be anything like Tina," I snapped. She screamed that she was a 'vanilla' kind of person. I wasn't. "Being with me isn't amateur hour, Hargrove."

Billy grinned. "You think I'd want you if I thought you were?"

"I think you're interested in any sexually active woman," I replied.

Billy laughed under his breath. "Not just any woman. Not many catch my eye."

"That's a lie," I growled.

"And hold onto it," Billy corrected himself.

It made no sense as to why Billy found himself so interested in me, but I wasn't going to complain. I was glad it had happened. I blushed at his comment but tried to cover it up with an eye roll. "Did you really call Tina my name?" I asked, trying to direct the conversation back to what we'd been talking about before.

"Yep," Billy replied plainly. I shot him a scowl. He didn't meet my eyes but he knew the look I was giving him. "Don't give me that look. Like you never have any salacious thoughts keep you up at night."

"Sure, but I can take care of myself," I huffed.

Billy's eyes shot over to me. I grinned at him, my eyes glittering playfully. "You'd rather do it yourself?" Billy asked.

"If it means I don't have to stop and explain the right way to do it," I admitted.

Billy snorted in amusement. "That's pathetic."

"You're telling me," I agreed.

The number of times I'd had to correct or change what a guy was

doing to me was almost comical. Billy glanced at me again as we continued down the road. He turned back toward the arcade after a few minutes. I smirked, leaning back in the seat, knowing what Billy was looking at. My low-cut tank top was hiked up around my waist and my shorts were a size too small, riding up on my thighs. Billy placed a hand on my leg, resting his fingers on the inside of my thigh. I blushed slightly.

As Billy moved his fingers against my leg, I grabbed a cigarette from my pack and lit it, blowing the smoke out. I handed it over to Billy after a moment, who took three long drags before handing it back. I glanced up at him and smiled as he met my eyes. We exchanged a grin for a moment before I looked back at the road. I realized that Billy was bringing me toward a small diner near the arcade. We stopped and hopped out of the car, heading into the diner. Billy wrapped an arm around my waist as we placed ourselves on the same side of a booth.

We smiled at each other as I pulled my knees up to my chest. I was extremely relieved that Billy wasn't angry with me. That meant that I was one apology down. "So, what did you do last night?" I asked him.

Billy smirked. "Do you want to know?"

My face fell. He had gone out and hooked up with someone while I'd felt like an ass all night from my date with Mark. "And here I was feeling terrible all night about what I did," I hissed.

Billy laughed. "Nah, I stayed home after I went for a long drive."

A wave of relief washed over me. "And you didn't stop by?" I teased.

What if Billy had come by? What would I have done? Billy must have been thinking the same thing. "Would you have let me in?" Billy asked, sending me a brilliant grin. I bit my lip anxiously. I would have loved to let him in, in more than one way. He knew it, too. "Did you say you felt terrible all night?"

"I guess I have a bigger conscience than I thought I did," I muttered irritably.

Billy smiled at me as the waitress walked up. "Can I get you two something?" she asked.

My stomach began rumbling loudly. Billy's eyes moved to me and he began laughing. "What do you want?" Billy asked.

"Umm... Chocolate chip pancakes?" I half-asked, half-said.

Billy chuckled, shaking his head. "That's cute." I blushed dumbly as I looked down at my lap. "Can we get a stack? And two black coffees?" he asked the waitress, glancing at me for confirmation.

I nodded. "Sure thing. I'll be back with that in a few minutes."

"Thank you," we told her together.

It dawned on me as the waitress walked back to the kitchen that Billy had known something as little as the way I took my coffee. I pulled my legs back into the booth as I leaned against Billy. He smiled at me, wrapping an arm over my shoulder. "I wondered if you would be at the arcade this morning," Billy admitted.

"Did I surprise you?" I asked curiously.

"I thought you'd be here, but I thought you'd have Mark with you," Billy said.

Another stab of disappointment went through my chest. "Is that what you think of me?" I asked, trying to hide the sadness in my voice.

Billy was silent for a moment before he shook his head. "No. I knew you had only gone to Mark because you wanted to try and make me jealous," Billy confirmed. I was relieved that he knew how bad I felt about my actions yesterday. "I know you well enough to know that you would feel guilty about what you'd done so I figured you'd let Mark down gently."

"I tried, but I'm positive Mark will never speak to me again," I said.

Mark could have made a good friend. I had to try and fix things between us later. "His loss is my gain," Billy said.

I smiled at him as I shook my head. "I was never his to lose."

We exchanged a smile and remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, Billy asked, "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I don't have any plans at the moment," I told him.

"Do you want to help me with algebra?" Billy asked.

"Algebra?" I asked doubtfully, arching an eyebrow.

"Scout's honor," Billy said, holding up a three-fingered salute.

I'd known Billy long enough to know that he didn't want to study. He didn't want to study algebra, at least. Maybe anatomy. I rolled my eyes at his hopeful stare. "Sure. I'll meet you at the library," I told him pointedly.

Billy's face fell. "The library?" he asked defeatedly.

"The library," I confirmed sternly. "We're going somewhere in public... for now."

"How about if I show incentive to get better grades?" Billy asked.

"Here you two are."

Billy and I glanced up and smiled at the waitress. "Thank you," I said. She placed the stack of pancakes on the table and walked off. I took the bottle of syrup and dripped it onto the stack, smirking as I dripped some onto my fingers. I licked the syrup off, smiling at Billy innocently as I did so. His eyes darkened. I leaned into him, placing my lips at his ear, brushing them against his lobe as I spoke. "It's like I said. It'll come with all the perks."

My lips gently brushed his throat as I pulled away. I could feel a groan erupt deep within his chest. Billy ran his fingers over my lips, wiping off the leftover syrup to place it in his mouth. "Deal," Billy said.

Billy was the only guy I knew who would have done something like that. We smirked at each other as I pulled back. I was seconds away

from kissing him and I knew that he felt the same. The only reason I stopped myself from planting a big one on his mouth was that I didn't want our first kiss to be in a breakfast diner with a stack of chocolate chip pancakes underneath us. I giggled slightly at the thought as I began cutting up the stack. I took the left side of the stack and Billy took the right.

We chatted happily among ourselves while we ate. We joked about what we had spent last night doing. Billy told me that he had come within seconds of calling Tina to hook up. When I asked why he didn't, he refused to answer. I insisted that it was because he knew that he would have rather been with me. Billy reminded me that I'd already known that. I smiled at him, glad that we were both on our way to admitting that we wanted to... be together? Hook up? I wasn't sure.

I'd teased Billy that I'd had so much fun with Mark last night, though I had already told him that that wasn't the truth. Billy didn't believe anything that came out of my mouth regarding the date, though I did notice his jaw tense a little bit when I mentioned our kiss. His reaction made me grin. I had seen him kiss girls in front of me when we had first become friends. Now I was going to tell him - in excruciating detail with a few embellishments - about the one kiss I'd had since arriving in Hawkins.

It amused me to no end that the idea of me even kissing someone else bothered Billy. Every time I mentioned anything about the kiss, Billy had no response. When I mentioned the kiss, Billy insisted that I would have rather kissed him. When I mentioned the type of kiss it was, Billy told me that it must have been boring; closed-mouthed, and innocent. He was right. When I asked Billy what kind of kiss he would have gone with, I was shocked by his answer.

Billy grabbed my hip and pulled me against him. He spoke with a low and gravelly voice. He warned me that it wouldn't be slow. He wasn't a slow and gentle kind of man. He was going to make me forget everything - how to move, breathe, or speak. He would only want to hear me moan his name. He would slam me against the door frame, tearing at my clothes, as he would explore my every curve. Before the kiss was over, I would be begging for him. I felt like begging for him now. His speech was profane and more detailed than I had been

expecting.

We were within seconds of kissing each other when I was shocked away from him by the sight of the waitress, who was coming with the check. "Here you two are," she said, handing us the check and staring at us suspiciously.

"Thank you," Billy said, taking the check.

"This one should be on me," I said, reaching for it.

"You'll find a way to make it up to me," Billy teased.

That was a fair deal. I rested my palm against Billy's upper thigh, squeezing it gently. "I guess I could think of something," I said quietly.

Billy's voice turned into a low warning growl. "Rachel..."

"Yes?" I asked innocently.

Billy reached out to my thigh and grabbed it, digging his fingers in harder than anyone else ever had. I gasped from the pain. Billy used his spare hand to drop some cash on the table for the pancakes. Once it was down, Billy grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the booth. I stumbled after him as Billy told the waitress to keep the change. He dragged me to his car and opened the passenger door, tossing me in. I collapsed into the seat as Billy walked around the car and threw himself into the driver's side.

Billy didn't start driving as I had initially expected. Instead, he grabbed me under the thighs and pulled me onto his lap. I closed my eyes and looked up as Billy grabbed at my shorts, pulling the back of the waistband down. His other hand slid under my shirt and began pushing it up. He grabbed my hair and pulled it back. I gasped at the pressure as he pressed his mouth against my throat. He bit the skin there roughly as he shifted his mouth upward. It was brushing against my jaw as I reached for his pants.

Billy slowly moved his mouth against my ear and whispered, "Beg for it."

"What?" I asked, shattered from my haze.

"Beg me," Billy repeated.

The heat of the moment had passed. I shoved Billy back against the seat. "No!" I snapped.

It was the reaction he had been expecting. Billy grinned at me, knowing that he had pushed me into a corner. "You're right. I know that you want me and you know that I want you. I've asked you out. Your turn," Billy said haughtily.

"Are you kidding?" I snapped.

Billy shook his head. "Not about this, Rach."

"Not going to happen," I hissed.

"We'll see," Billy teased.

It wouldn't happen. Billy pressed a kiss against the top of my chest and squeezed my thigh gently. I bit my lip to stifle a moan as Billy threw me into the passenger seat. I let out a loud bark of laughter. We were getting so close. Despite how stubborn we were, I knew that we wouldn't last much longer. We chatted amicably during the trip back to the arcade, despite the previously tense moment. It shocked me how we could be hot and heavy one moment and platonic friends the next. I didn't know how we were able to sit here in relative peace now.

Once we arrived back at the arcade, we jumped out of the car to wait for Max's hour to end. I scowled as I noticed some middle-aged women passing, all giving Billy the eye. Billy smirked back at the women, knowing that I was annoyed. "At least you'll always have middle-aged housewives to give your ego a good stroke," I huffed.

"I'd much rather get a stroke from you," Billy shot back.

I laughed at him. "Thanks, Billy," I said happily.

"For?" he asked.

"Everything," I said pointedly.

He had forgiven me when no one else would have. He had easily become my closest friend in Hawkins. Billy smiled at me. "Anytime, Rach."

We stood together for a moment as a smile split my lips. I thought about heading back to my car for a moment before I stopped, deciding to throw caution to the wind. We had been extremely touchy since we had met but we hadn't exchanged many real hugs. I threw my arms over Billy's shoulders and tugged him into me. He laughed quietly as he pressed his head into my shoulder and rested his arms against my bare back. I shivered as his fingers worked their way into the waistband of my pants. After a few seconds, I pulled away.

I wasn't able to pull back from him as I felt his fingers latch onto my belt loop. "I knew you didn't just have one," Billy said, his eyes focused toward the ground.

"What?" I asked dumbly. I didn't know what he was talking about. Billy motioned down to my right hipbone and I suddenly realized what he meant. I blushed awkwardly. That was a tattoo I could tell him the real story about. "Oh, I had a friend who was a tattoo artist and this was my way of trying to impress him."

"Did it work?" Billy asked.

"Partially. It turned out he wasn't worth impressing," I said.

The one time I had hooked up with my old tattoo artist was okay, but it hadn't lasted more than five minutes. At least the tattoo I had gotten out of it was cute. "Count me impressed," Billy teased.

The tattoo that I had gotten out of it was a wing that rested low on my right hipbone. The ink was so low on my skin that normally I wasn't able to see it as long as I had pants on. That had been the point when I'd gotten it - I knew my parents would have killed me if they'd seen it. The ink ran from my hipbone to the middle of my pelvic bone. The wing wilted from feathers to a shooting star at the end. Billy's hand shifted to the front of my pants and I sucked in a

breath as I felt him pull the fabric down slightly.

I pulled his hand back. "If you want to see the rest of it, you've got to at least buy me dinner," I warned.

Billy chuckled. "Oh, I can do far more than that."

We both knew that we had a long night coming. The question was when it would take place. I smirked at Billy, throwing his hand back to himself. I smirked at him again. I knew that we were both trying to hold out but I also knew that we wouldn't last much longer. I wrapped my arms over Billy's shoulders, which he surprisingly didn't object to. He wrapped his arms around my waist in response, resting his palms on my back pants pockets. His fingers wrapped over my rear that didn't quite fit in my too-small shorts.

"Winters," Billy growled.

"Hmm?" I hummed innocently.

"You know how to drive a guy out of his goddamn mind," Billy said.

He wasn't wrong. "If you think this is too much, maybe you can't handle me," I teased.

The moment it came out of my mouth I knew that Billy wouldn't be happy. He didn't like me bringing his manhood into questioning. Billy took one hand off of my rear and grabbed my hair, pulling it up into a makeshift ponytail and yanking it back even harder than he had in the car. I let out a half-gasp, half-moan from the sharp pain as I had earlier. Billy placed his other hand underneath my thigh and lifted me onto the car hood, stepping between my open legs. His fingers grabbed at me hard enough to leave bruises.

"I can keep up just fine, Rach. Can you?" Billy asked.

"Guess we'll find out," I said knowingly.

There was no doubt that we were going to hook up. We both knew it. "Oh, we will," Billy confirmed.

"Gross."

Billy and I pulled back a bit to see that Max had arrived. She was scowling at us, openly groping each other in public. I laughed at Max's reaction, shoving Billy off of me and hopping off the car. "Hey, Max," I greeted her.

"Hi, Rachel," Max said, smiling at me.

Max jumped into the car as I turned back to Billy, resting my hands on his belt buckle, tugging him into me. We were so close that we could almost meet lips. "Bye, Billy," I said quietly.

Billy pushed up my tank top and splayed his open palm against my upper abdomen, his thumb resting underneath the underwire of my bra. It was just barely brushing my bare skin. "See you around, Rach," Billy replied.

My breath seemed to be lodged in my throat. I couldn't remember how to breathe. All I could do was force myself to leave before I did something stupid. I leaned up and pressed a kiss against Billy's cheek. He held my waist for a moment before letting me go. I headed back to my car, feeling like I had just sprinted a mile. I didn't know how or when it had happened, but I was feeling something strong for Billy and I was terrified that those feelings were going to get me hurt.

6. Chapter 5

About two hours after I had initially left my house to apologize to Billy, I arrived back home pleased with the way the morning had gone. My parents were quick to notice that I was in a much better mood than I had been when I'd gotten home last night. I'd just had to check in the rearview mirror to ensure that my face wasn't still flushed when I had walked back into the house. My parents were trying to contain themselves but they had still jumped at the chance to talk to me, wanting to know what had happened over the previous twelve hours.

"Was it a productive morning?" Mom asked as I wandered into the kitchen.

"It was," I told her, hopping up to sit on the counter. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"Did you ever go out with someone for the wrong reasons?"

My mother's eyes sparkled a little bit once she realized what I was talking about. She had already known that the date hadn't gone well but now she knew why. "I've never done that but it doesn't mean that I've never done anything for the wrong reasons," Mom said. I sighed. How could I have done what I had to Mark? I was never the nicest person in the world, but I was ashamed of myself. "Do you want to talk about what happened with Mark?"

"Not really, but it would probably help," I pouted.

"Did Mark do something?" Mom asked nervously.

"No, Mark was wonderful," I told her honestly. He wasn't my type but that didn't mean that he wasn't a good date in his way. "I'm the asshole."

Mom nodded. "Let me go out on a limb and say that this somehow has something to do with your friend Billy?"

She knew me well. "You're starting to sound like me," I teased. We exchanged a small smile. My parents had always known about my unique ability to know what anyone was thinking. "How did you know?"

Mom had only met Billy once for a brief moment. "I've only seen a little bit of your friendship, but I can tell that you two care for each other," she said. I blushed like an idiot. We didn't care for each other. We were just attracted to each other. "I also know my daughter and I know that the star quarterback or funny drama club kid isn't for you. You're your mother's daughter." I laughed at the truth of the statement. "You're interested in the guy who may not be the easiest to get together with."

"Difficult to get together with Billy Hargrove would be the understatement of the century," I growled.

"He's got that look about him," Mom said.

"What look?" I asked.

"He's the kind of boy that draws the eyes of every woman who he crosses paths with, but that's as far as it goes. He may know what to say and what to do but when it comes time to talk things out, he goes silent," Mom reasoned.

"That seems accurate. If I'm being fair, though, I'm the one who hasn't been willing to talk things out," I said.

Billy may not have been the most emotional person in the world but he had made it clear he wanted to hook up. I was the one who kept refusing. "No? Why is that?" Mom asked. I blushed as I looked at the floor. I wasn't sure if I should admit what I was afraid of. "I'd much rather you talk things out with me than keep them bottled up. I'm your mother. It's what I'm here for."

"Billy isn't the kind of guy to keep a girl around after they... go out," I said awkwardly.

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that he slept with girls and then never spoke to them again. It didn't matter. Mom nodded

understandingly and said, "I see."

I blushed again. "Do you see the dilemma?"

"Yes, I do. You like Billy for far more than his looks. I think that much is very obvious," Mom said. I nodded at her. I had grown to like Billy for a lot more than his looks. "You're afraid that if the two of you go out, he will have gotten what he wants and you're going to lose the friendship that you've built with him."

I appreciated that my mother wasn't going to come out and say that she knew we would sleep together. "Pretty much. Any advice?" I asked.

Mom smiled, walking up and brushing the hair back off of my forehead. "Honey, you're one of the bravest people I've ever met." I smiled. "You'll do whatever it takes to get what you want. When you were younger, I always thought you were fearless. The truth is, we're not fearless. No one is and that's okay. Just don't let that fear stop you," Mom advised.

"What if he drops me?" I asked.

"What if he doesn't?" Mom countered.

"I don't think I trust that he won't," I told her.

Mom smiled. "You never know. Billy Hargrove may surprise you. Hasn't he already?"

Billy had surprised me since we'd met. Mom and I exchanged a long look. She was giving me a knowing stare. She knew that I had already been surprised by Billy's actions toward me. He had become my friend. He was my best friend in Hawkins. Billy hadn't stopped speaking to me yet and he had promised that he wouldn't leave me once we did hook up. Even our minor hookups hadn't steered him away. Billy Hargrove had been many things to me since we'd met and surprising had been one of them.

"Don't let the fear of what could happen make nothing happen," Mom advised.

"What would you do?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "It's not about what I would do. It's about what you would do and I have a good feeling that you already know what you're going to do."

We both knew what I wanted. "I know what I'd like to do, I just don't know if I'm bold enough," I said.

"Speaking as someone who knows you better than anyone else, you are," Mom said.

Fair enough. I had never been a shy person. I smiled at my mother. I appreciated her confidence in me. Mom went back to cooking as the doorbell rang. I heard the front door open a moment later followed by some quiet chatter. "Rachel! Nancy's here!" Dad called.

"Thanks!" I yelled back. I hopped off of the counter and turned to hug Mom. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome. You're my girl. Come to me whenever you need something," she said.

"I promise," I said.

As soon as I had, Nancy walked into the kitchen and smiled at us. "Good morning, Nancy," Mom told her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Winters," Nancy said.

"Do you girls have plans today?" Mom asked us.

"Do we?" I asked Nancy.

"We're going shopping," Nancy said.

"Have fun, ladies," Mom said, giggling.

"We will. See you!" I yelled back. I must have been taking too long as Nancy grabbed me by the arm and dragged me outside, much in the same way she had done to me yesterday. We headed out to my car and climbed in. "Are we going shopping?"

"We are!" Nancy chirped. I laughed, starting the engine and pulling out of the driveway. "You're going to Tommy's party, right?"

"I'd considered it but I hadn't decided yet," I told her.

Nancy whined quietly. I knew that she wanted me to go but I wasn't convinced I wanted to yet. "We'll get you a new outfit and then you'll have to go," Nancy told me. I laughed. That sounded like a good enough reason to go. "While we shop, you can tell me about your date last night." I threw back my head and groaned. Nancy laughed. "It was that good, huh?"

"It was easily one of the worst dates I've ever been on," I told her.

"What happened?" Nancy asked curiously.

"Exactly what you said would happen," I growled.

"It's a long ride downtown," Nancy goaded.

As Nancy and I drove downtown, I recounted what had happened on my date with Mark last night. Nancy didn't look surprised that Mark had figured out the truth. I hadn't made it very difficult to figure out anyway. Nancy did seem saddened to hear that Mark wasn't willing to speak with me after what had happened but she didn't look surprised. I wasn't either. If someone had done the same thing to me, I probably wouldn't have wanted to speak with them either.

"I'm sorry about Mark," Nancy said.

I shook my head at her. "Don't be. It was my fault. I shouldn't have gone out with him when I was doing it for all the wrong reasons."

"He'll probably forgive you," Nancy said.

Considering how angry he had looked last night, I doubted Mark would ever forgive me. "Maybe. You should have seen how hurt he looked though, Nance," I told her.

"I'd be shocked if you told me he wasn't hurt," Nancy said.

"I don't know how to apologize."

"Say you're sorry."

"I know that!" I snapped. Telling him that I was sorry didn't seem to suffice. "I already said it."

What else could I say to him? "You said it immediately after he realized what was going on. Give him some time to cool down. There was no way he was going to forgive you right away," Nancy pointed out.

"I'll feel better once I can get him to forgive me," I said.

"Just give him a few days."

"I'm just impatient when I want something."

The look on Nancy's face told me everything I needed to know. "Really? Because you've been astoundingly patient with Billy," Nancy said. I rolled my eyes at her. I knew that she was going to point out my slowly-evolving relationship with Billy. "It's been over three weeks and you two still haven't done anything."

"I'm not sure I'd classify us as being that innocent," I mumbled.

"You know what I meant!" Nancy snapped. "You haven't kissed or slept together, have you?"

Somehow, we hadn't. "Not yet."

"Yet?" Nancy asked knowingly.

"Ever," I hissed.

Who was I kidding? My voice hitched in my throat as I said it. "Rachel, you and I both know that's a lie," Nancy pointed out. She had said it and Billy had said it too. "He wants you and you want him. Tell me the truth. Do you think Billy would never speak to you again once you hooked up?"

"No," I admitted.

"So, what's stopping you?" Nancy asked.

In all honesty, I didn't have a good reason not to hook up with Billy. "I have no idea. Even if we did hook up and he didn't drop me, what would come after?" I asked.

It had been a long time since I was in a real relationship. I didn't know how to do it anymore. "You mean..."

"What would we be? Friends with benefits?" I asked. That was what I had done since my first boyfriend. Billy barely seemed capable of that. "That seems like the most Billy would be capable of."

"Do you want to... date him?" Nancy asked slowly.

Nancy sounded shocked that I may have wanted something more than a guy to hook up with. "I'm not sure. Nance, I haven't dated a guy since my first real boyfriend well over a year ago, and that had kind of a messy end. I've hooked up with some guys after that but never had another relationship after him. I've never been interested in another guy that way until Billy," I admitted.

"Wow, I knew you wanted to hook up with him but I didn't realize how deep your feelings for him were," Nancy said.

Neither did I until a few days ago. "I guess I see a different side to him than everyone else does," I muttered.

"Go for it, Rachel," Nancy urged. "You know you want to."

"Who would have thought Nancy Wheeler would be the one encouraging me to hook up with the new bad boy of Hawkins High School?" I teased, grinning at her.

"Not me," Nancy admitted. We both laughed as I turned into the center of the downtown district. "Park there."

I pulled into the spot she was pointing me to that was located in front of a vintage clothing store. I raised my eyebrows curiously. "A vintage store?" I asked her.

"There's some really cute stuff in there," Nancy said.

I'd never tried shopping at a vintage store before. I'd always gone to

the expensive chain stores at the malls. "I'll take your word for it," I told her slowly. Nancy reached over to punch me in the shoulder. I laughed at her annoyance. "Sorry, I guess I'm used to the huge malls in Florida."

"Come on. Trust me," Nancy said.

If I was going to live in a small town I may as well have tried to act like a small-town girl. "Let's do it," I told her. I smiled at Nancy as we climbed out of the car and headed into the store. It was a little overwhelming. There were clothes scattered everywhere and nothing was organized. "Okay, what should I go with?"

Nancy hummed. "Something Billy won't be able to resist taking off."

I laughed and said, "That's anything I wear."

"Come on!" Nancy chirped, tugging me with him. "I'll pick it out."

Was she going to be able to pick out something between mine and Billy's styles? We didn't have the same style. I raised my eyebrows curiously. "Nance, honey, I love you but we don't have the same styles, and uh... you aren't Billy's style," I said, looking her up and down.

"Just trust me," Nancy said.

If she was going to get something for me, I was going to get something for her. "Can I pick something for you?" I asked her.

Nancy whined nervously. "Maybe."

"I'm taking that as a 'yes.' Go!" I barked, shoving her away.

We both laughed as we headed into separate rows of clothes. I noticed that Nancy was heading toward the darker sections of clothes. I headed to the lighter and pastel colors. I would take into account what Nancy would normally wear. It took me about half an hour of searching to find something suitable. It was a black, white, and gold dress that was tight on the top and floated out around the knees. There were striped patterns along the dress and two eagles that came together at the hips.

Once I was satisfied that it would look good on her, I ran to Nancy and tossed it in her arms. "Okay, try it!" I chirped happily.

Nancy laughed and headed into the dressing room. I looked through the ring section for a moment while Nancy changed. When she came out, I smiled proudly. Nancy looked at herself in the mirror nervously. "It's cute but -"

"No!" I interrupted, covering her mouth with my hand. "You said it's cute and you can't take it back."

"It's not something I'd normally wear," Nancy said.

"That's the point, genius. It's a party, Nance. Come on! Branch out a little. Wear the dress for me, please?" I whined. Nancy groaned as I rubbed against her shoulder teasingly. "I bet Steve will love it."

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Okay, your turn." Nancy shoved a handful of clothes into my arms. "Go!" she said, shoving me.

I laughed, stumbling into the dressing room. Nancy didn't grab a dress as I had for her. She had picked out something that looked a lot more complicated to wear. I moved slowly, trying to gather everything I needed. The outfit looked cute but Nancy hadn't thought to make it easy to get into. It took me almost five minutes to figure the outfit out. Once I had finished changing into Nancy's outfit, I turned to the mirror and audibly gasped. I hadn't expected an outfit like this from Nancy.

Maybe I needed Nancy to be my stylist. I was stunned by what I saw in the mirror. I had a pair of black fishnets on with rhinestones placed on the fabric. Laying over the fishnets was a tight and short blue skirt with holes deliberately torn in it. The waistband of the fishnets came over the waistband of the skirt. Nancy had picked out a black lace bra to wear as an undershirt. Over it was a see-through cropped lace long-sleeved shirt. I could easily see through it to the bra, which was also mostly see-through.

It looked like something I would have picked. I walked out to where Nancy was waiting. She grinned brilliantly at her work. "What do you think?" Nancy asked.

"Shit. I think I should have had you start dressing me weeks ago," I teased.

"You remind me of a hard-rock version of Madonna," Nancy said.

I'd never liked Madonna as a singer, but even I had to admit that her style was great. "You know what? If this whole reporting thing doesn't work out for you, I think you have a serious future in the personal styling department," I told Nancy.

"Thank you. So, you're coming to the party?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Rachel!"

"It's been a while since I've been to a party like that," I said.

Nancy whined, grabbing my arm. "Come on, even I'm going."

"I'll think about it, okay?" I asked.

"Do you need a ride?" Nancy asked.

"No, don't worry about it. I'll drive myself if I decide to go," I told her.

"Buy the outfit, at least," Nancy said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you'll feel like an idiot if you buy the outfit and don't go to the party," Nancy said confidently.

It was a good way to get me to go to the party. We exchanged a look and laughed. I smacked Nancy but decided to buy the outfit anyway. Nancy and I changed into our normal clothes and headed to the register. We paid for our new outfits and I gasped, shocked at how cheap clothes were in Hawkins. The excitement in my eyes was enough to make Nancy laugh. We headed back home, chatting away happily about clothes. I told Nancy how stupidly expensive clothes were at the big malls in Florida.

Once we arrived back home we headed upstairs to study for a little while. It took some nagging from Nancy to get me to do my work. I liked learning but I wasn't a fan of studying for my classes with subject matter that I was forced to learn. Nancy was continuing an essay she had for her writing class while I worked on integrals for my calculus class. Nancy stared at my math homework and shook her head. She was good at algebra but had no desire to move onto calculus.

As we worked, we chatted a little bit about our futures. Nancy had always wanted to be an investigative journalist. I smiled. It sounded like an interesting career path but not one that I would have ever chosen for myself. Nancy loved that I wanted to be an engineer. She was all for female empowerment. I admitted to Nancy that I knew how hard it would be to find a job that didn't involve making a man's coffee (which made Nancy laugh) but I told her that I was determined to make a real career for myself.

The two of us studied for our classes for most of the afternoon. We had as good of a time as we possibly could while we were studying. I got most of my homework done and Nancy managed to finish her essay. I promised to read it over before Monday and Nancy promised to spellcheck my essay. I was admittedly not the best speller in the world. Nancy only left to go back to her house so that I had time to shower before dinner. Nancy left me with a warning that I had better come to Tommy's party.

Once Nancy had left I showered and changed into a pair of daisy dukes and an Iron Maiden shirt that used to be my Dad's. I threw my long hair up in a messy ponytail without brushing it. I headed downstairs and smiled at my parents as we sat down to have dinner together. We had a pleasant meal, chatting happily, and discussing our days. I told my parents about my classes. My father talked about work and my mother talked about some of her friends she had made in town. She had become close with Karen Wheeler - Nancy's mother.

We spent almost an hour chatting at the table. I'd had a good day for once. It was the first day since we'd arrived in Hawkins that I'd felt chatty with everyone I crossed paths with. I wondered if it was because, for the first time, I felt more confident about where things stood with Billy. I was finally feeling like I may have stood a chance

with him. That thought cheered me up a bit. I mentioned to my parents that there was a party but I wasn't sure if I was going to go. They encouraged me to go and have fun with my friends.

It was hard not to laugh as I thought that it was Billy I would have liked to have fun with. I batted the idea of going to the party back and forth in my head for a long time. I did want to go but for some reason, I was feeling a little hesitant. It was just past eight o'clock when I heard Steve come get Nancy for the party. I was determined that I would make my choice in the next half an hour whether or not I was going to go. In the meantime, I was curled up on the couch watching television with my father.

"Rachel!" Mom called from the kitchen.

"Yeah?"

"I thought I heard the mail come around. Can you grab it?"

"Sure. I'll be right back," I told them.

My legs groaned in protest as I peeled myself off of the couch after having sat in the same position for almost two hours. I wandered into the driveway and headed toward the mailbox, yawning tiredly. Maybe I wouldn't go to the party. I grabbed the mail and turned to head back to the house, thumbing through it. It was mostly bills and some magazines. I stopped walking when I noticed Billy's Camaro come screaming up on the sidewalk, halting in front of my house. I arched an eyebrow as he rolled down the window and grinned at me.

"Can I help you?" I asked him.

"Come on, get in," Billy said, motioning to the passenger seat.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Tommy's party," Billy answered.

"I don't recall you asking me to the party," I told him.

"I don't recall caring," Billy shot back. "Get in."

We seemed to get ourselves into awkward situations whenever we were in his car. "No, thank you. Even if I do decide to go to the party, I'm perfectly capable of driving myself," I said determinedly.

"You're not planning on drinking, then?" Billy asked knowingly.

"And you're not?" I shot back.

"I am, but I can hold my liquor," Billy said.

"What makes you think I can't?" I snapped.

"I'm hopeful," Billy replied.

My face lit up. I felt a little stupid when I realized that he was planning on drinking and I would too, but he was hoping that I would get a little friendlier when I did. He would be thrilled to know that was exactly the kind of drunk I was. It really would have been a shame to put the outfit I'd bought to waste. I smirked as I looked at my clothes. I was barefoot, wearing ripped up daisy dukes, and a loose-fitting Iron Maiden shirt. It wasn't good party attire and I had a much better choice.

"Hang on," I told Billy. "I'm going to get changed."

"And you're not going to invite me in?" Billy teased.

I scowled at him. "Wait here," I snapped. I darted inside and threw the mail on the counter. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Mom said, flipping through the mail.

I darted off as I didn't want to make Billy wait too long. I jumped up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I grabbed the bag with the clothes Nancy had picked out for me from the secondhand store and changed into them as quickly as possible. I brushed my teeth and pulled my hair from its hold. It was still a little damp. It would dry in waves. I didn't have enough time to do anything else to it. It looked cute enough when it air-dried. I quickly put on some makeup.

It took me a few minutes to make sure my party look was cute. I wore makeup similar to what I had worn at old parties I'd gone to in

Florida. I ringed my eyes with black eyeliner, making an inner and outer wing. I placed some deep purple eyeshadow on my eyelids and threw a bit of glitter on over it. I ran thick black mascara over my lashes but kept my blush and lip gloss minimal. It was more dramatic than I would have normally worn, but that was what I was going for.

Once I had gotten changed and finished my makeup, I slipped on my black combat boots with a chunky heel as I darted back downstairs. It had been almost ten minutes. I had left Billy waiting long enough. "Going somewhere?" Dad asked.

He had noticed what I was wearing and didn't look pleased with it. "I'm going to a party with some friends," I told him.

"Party?" Dad asked.

I'd already told my parents that there was a party tonight but my outfit now gave away the kind of party it was. "Dad..." I groaned. "Try and remember that you were a teenager once upon a time."

He sighed. "Be safe. Don't hesitate to call if you need any help."

"I promise," I said.

"Are you driving yourself?" Mom asked.

"No, I've got a ride," I said, walking in front of the hallway mirror.

Mom followed me into the hallway and glanced at me with her reflection. I was leaned over, fluffing my hair in the mirror to make sure I looked okay. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "Make him work for it," Mom whispered.

I giggled, wrapping my arms around my mother's. "Thanks, Mom."

"Knock him dead," Mom teased.

"Absolutely," I said happily. I smiled at her one last time as I headed outside and walked up to Billy's window. He was focused on puffing on a cigarette with his eyes closed. "How do I look?"

Billy's eyes snapped open as he turned to look at me. His gaze

darkened immediately. "Fuck the party," Billy growled.

It was next to impossible to resist, but I had a good reason to go to the party first. "That has free booze? I don't think so," I told Billy. He laughed as I walked around his car and slid into the passenger seat. "We'll at least get the free drinks first. We can talk about what happens after."

"We both know what happens after," Billy said.

Yes, we did. We didn't need to say it out loud. I looked Billy over, smiling at him. "You don't look too bad yourself, Hargrove," I said.

We were dressed to the nines for the night. I noticed that the two of us looked like we belonged together. Our outfits somehow wound up complimenting each other. He was wearing a short-sleeved deep blue button-down shirt that was only buttoned to just above his belly button. It left his bare chest almost all the way revealed. He had his brown leather jacket over his shoulders and his jeans were as tight as ever. I noticed that he was wearing the same medallion he had since the day we had met.

"I thought you hadn't decided to go to the party," I said curiously.

"I hadn't," Billy admitted.

"What changed your mind?" I asked.

Billy grinned, meeting my eyes for a moment. "You decided to go."

"Funny. That was the same reason I decided to come out tonight," I admitted.

Billy grinned. "Do you have a curfew?" he asked.

"No." I noticed the grin grow on Billy's face as I reached over and took the cigarette from his lips, puffing on it myself for a minute. Billy took one hand off the steering wheel and rested his hand on my thigh, where it had become a habit for it to land. "What about you, Hargrove? Do you have a bedtime we have to get you home by?" I teased.

Billy tightened his grip to squeeze my thigh painfully. "Only if you're coming with me." I laughed as I leaned over and started pawing through Billy's glove box. "Looking for something?" Billy asked.

"I'll let you know when I find it," I said playfully.

There had to be something interesting here. Billy laughed as I started digging through his glove box. Most of his belongings were very boring. I found some rolling paper with small baggies that were meant for weed. I laughed, placing them back in the box carefully. I shouldn't have been surprised as he was from California. They were big smokers. Billy offered to share a joint with me anytime. I teased him that he had to find a dealer first. Judging by the look in his eyes, he had already found one.

Underneath the rolling paper were the normal boring car things. Like me, he had a tire pressure gauge, vehicle paperwork, lighters, and the owner's manual. I dug through his boring paperwork before finally finding what I was looking for. Old cassette tapes. I grinned, thumbing through them. He had Back in Black by AC/DC, Heaven & Hell by Black Sabbath, High 'n Dry by Def Leppard, and The Number of the Beast by Iron Maiden. I grabbed the Iron Maiden cassette. I was about to pull it out when I saw a box of condoms.

Of course. I pulled them from the glove box and scowled at Billy. "Really?" I asked, holding them up.

He glanced over just long enough to smirk at the annoyance on my face. "What? Now you're going to yell at me for practicing safe sex?" Billy asked.

That was a fair point. "I'm impressed that you do," I said.

"They're uncomfortable as hell, but I hate kids," Billy said, making me laugh.

"I'm sure that feeling's returned," I teased. Billy whacked me on the shoulder as I reached into the box. It was a twelve-pack but there were only three left. "Someone's been having a good time."

"Don't be jealous, Rach. We can use a few," Billy teased.

"You'll need more than what's in there, Hargrove, and I'm not a big fan of anything getting in the way," I told him. Billy turned to me with a funny look on his face. I arched my eyebrow. "That's what we invented the pill for."

His eyes darkened as he realized why I had tossed his condoms back into the glove box carelessly. "You get better and better every day, Rach," Billy teased.

"You haven't seen anything yet, Hargrove," I shot back. We grinned at each other as I raised the Iron Maiden cassette again. "Can I?"

"Yeah. I didn't know you liked Iron Maiden," Billy said curiously.

"I love them," I told him.

Billy popped the Led Zeppelin cassette out of the player for me as I popped the Iron Maiden cassette in. I ran it to the title track, "The Number of the Beast." "Good choice," Billy commented.

"Thank you. I've always wanted to see them live. Their shows are supposed to be incredible," I said.

Mom wasn't a fan of the band but they were Dad's favorite. "I had plans to see them in California before we moved," Billy said.

"You weren't able to go to the show?" I asked him curiously. Billy shook his head. "God, I'd be pissed. Maybe you'll get to go one day. My dad took me to see Kiss a few years ago and that was a great show."

Billy nodded. "They came to San Diego a few years ago. I was going to see them but my date wasn't a rock fan."

Billy hadn't gone to a freaking Kiss concert just because his date wasn't a hard rock fan? He was out of his mind! "What the hell were you thinking? You should have left her on the side of the road and gone anyway!" I snapped.

Billy smirked. "Maybe next time."

I grinned, twisting in my chair a little bit to face Billy. "You can take

me."

"Would we make it to the show?" Billy asked playfully.

Normally, I would have admitted that we wouldn't make it, but there was no way I would miss a concert like that. "If I spend twenty dollars on concert tickets, I'm damn well seeing the band. You and your libido can wait two hours," I told him sharply.

Billy laughed as we headed toward Tommy's house. I began singing along to the songs as we drove down the road to Tommy's house. Billy commented that I had a good voice. I smiled and thanked him. It took about ten minutes to get to Tommy's house. He lived in a similar section of town as Nancy and I did. Tommy's house was already flooded with cars from our fellow students. The music was blaring down the street. Students were already milling around, drinking to their heart's content.

Maybe Indiana didn't understand the concept of being fashionably late. Billy parked not far from Tommy's front door. "Jesus. It looks like half of the school turned out for this," I said.

"Have you never been to a house party before?" Billy asked, surprised.

"I guess I wasn't expecting this from a little hick town like Hawkins," I said awkwardly.

Billy laughed. "That's fair."

We grinned at each other as Billy turned off the engine. The two of us hopped out of the car and headed to the front door. I could see that the majority of the junior and senior classes were here. We were greeted in the front yard by Tommy. He bumped fists with Billy and smiled at me. He looked shocked to see that I was at the party. "Rachel. You decided to come after all," Tommy said by way of greeting.

"What else did I have to do?" I said carelessly.

Hanging around the house with my parents seemed way too lame for Saturday night. Billy snorted at my comment and I nudged him. We

weren't going to hook up. Not yet. Billy and Tommy started chatting as Carol walked up. I turned to her, sensing that she wanted to say something. "You came with a date," Carol commented, looking at Billy.

"He's not a date. He's just a friend," I replied unconvincingly.

"That's a hell of a way to dress for just a friend," Carol said, staring at my outfit irritably.

She was angry that my outfit was drawing the eyes of most guys at the party. She must have been used to being the center of attention. "I don't dress for men. I dress for myself. You should try it," I growled.

Carol's jaw was practically on the ground, but I didn't care. I hated her and I had said it for effect. Carol was one of the nastiest students at Hawkins High School. She wanted to be the queen of the school and have all eyes on her, even though she had been dating Tommy for years. She didn't like that her reign was being threatened. Though I may have dressed to draw Billy's eyes sometimes, I didn't dress just for him. I was proud of my body. This was the time in my life I would be able to show it off so I was going to do it.

It looked like Carol wanted to say something, but I didn't want to hear her. I blew past Carol, shoving her out of the way. She stumbled back as I took Billy's hand and pulled him with her. "Come on. I could use a drink," I growled at Billy.

Billy and I headed into the kitchen; unfortunately, Carol and Tommy were following us. Billy had an arm wrapped around my waist as we walked through the living room. I noticed Billy glaring at a few guys who looked like they were about ready to say hello to me, making it a point to keep them at bay. His grip tightened slightly as Jason passed. I smirked to myself at his reaction as we walked into the kitchen and grabbed ourselves two beers. Billy and Tommy were chatting as I looked around. Steve and Nancy must have been here somewhere.

Just as I thought that they appeared. "You came!" Nancy chirped.

She was wearing the dress I'd picked out in the vintage store. I

grabbed Steve and Nancy in a tight hug as we pulled away from Billy, Tommy, and Carol a bit. "I had a cute outfit I couldn't waste," I teased, making a quick spin.

"That's underwear," Steve complained, looking at my outfit.

My parents would be happy to know that I had a third parent in Steve. "Your girlfriend picked it out," I told him.

Steve's jaw nearly dropped. "Nance!" he yelled at her.

Nancy backed away, looking surprised that we had turned it on her. "You know her as well as I do!" Nancy defended herself, pointing at me.

It looked like Steve was about to snap at her so I figured I would step in and keep her from getting in trouble with her boyfriend. "Let's be honest here. Considering what I could have come up with, this was probably on the conservative side," I told the pair, who both laughed.

That was when the pair noticed who I had walked in with. "And you came with a date," Nancy said quietly, motioning to Billy.

Steve groaned in annoyance. "Why can't you like Mark?" he asked.

Guys like Mark were sweet, but I had never been one for sweet guys. "Because I'm an asshole with a masochistic side, apparently," I said. Nancy and Steve laughed at my honesty. "What can I say? I can't shake him."

Nancy laughed. "Have fun."

"You too," I told the couple.

"Not that much fun," Steve said.

"Yes, Dad," I joked with Steve. He rolled his eyes at me. They were about to walk off when I called them back. "Hey! You owe me a dance later! Both of you!"

"Absolutely not," Steve growled.

I glanced at Nancy and said, "Get him drunk enough to dance."

Nancy laughed. "I'll work on it."

Whether or not they wanted to, I was going to get Nancy and Steve to dance. Nancy would probably be easy enough to get to dance with me for a while. Steve would be the real problem. He may have been a popular guy but he was the kind of person who hung out at the bar of a party rather than spinning around on the dance floor. Steve and Nancy grabbed themselves two drinks - a light beer for Steve and a soda for Nancy - as they headed back to the living room. Once they had vanished, I turned back to Billy.

Billy was standing at the counter talking to Tommy. Carol was at Tommy's side, sending me an annoyed glance. I glared at the trio as I realized that Vicki Carmichael had wandered up as well. She was standing almost pressed against Billy. I scowled at them. Vicki was offering to show Billy around the house; he didn't respond but he was grinning at her. That wasn't happening. I stepped into the tight space between the pair and shoved Vicki away. She stumbled back as I faced Billy but briefly glanced over my shoulder to scowl at Vicki.

"Uh-uh, he's taken. Shoo," I warned her.

Vicki huffed irritably and looked at Billy, but gave up when she realized he wasn't going to refute my claim. Billy grinned at me as Vicki walked off. "Don't get jealous, Rach," Billy teased.

"I am not jealous, Hargrove, but you can do much better than her," I told him. Billy nodded slowly. He didn't believe me. "I'm not going to associate with someone who stoops as low as Vicki Carmichael."

"Can I do any better than you?" Billy asked.

That was doubtful. I stepped into Billy, popping a knee between his slightly open legs. Billy reached down to rest a hand on my hip. "Absolutely not," I told Billy seriously. I was about to grab myself a drink when I spotted Mark out of the corner of my eyes. He had come to the party. I thought about leaving it for a moment, but I had to try. "I'll be right back."

Billy followed my gaze to see what I was looking at. He rolled his eyes and stepped back. "Good luck," Billy said.

It was obvious that Billy wasn't being honest with his words but I didn't care. I had to try and get Mark to forgive me one more time. He deserved to know how bad I felt about everything. "Mark!" I shouted, running up to him. Mark glanced up from his conversation with another one of the football players and sighed when he saw that it was me. He turned to walk away. Wait! Please don't walk away from me!"

Mark's football player friend (Isaac, if I recalled correctly) began pulling Mark away. "Do you think he wants to talk to you?" Isaac asked me.

"I wasn't aware this was your business. Get lost," I snapped.

"Are you -?"

"Go. I've got this," Mark interrupted Isaac.

"We'll be outside," Isaac told his friend.

"See you," Mark said. Isaac grabbed his shoulder comfortingly as he turned and walked off, leaving me somewhat alone with Mark. We stood together awkwardly for a moment. "Rachel, I -"

"Don't want to talk to me, I know," I interrupted. I knew that he didn't want to talk to me (understandably) but I had to get out my apology. "Please, just let me say one thing to you and if you don't want to hear anything else, I promise I'll walk away and never speak to you again." I waited for him to respond, but Mark only let out a deep breath. "Do I have the floor?"

Mark hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Go for it."

"First thing's first, I lied already. I'm not going to give up trying to get you to forgive me," I said. Mark stared at me for a moment before breaking out into laughter. I ran my hands through my hair. I had to stop lying. "I'm working on being a little more honest. So, here's me being honest. I am extremely patient when I want to be and I want you to forgive me, or at least, tell me you'll work on forgiving me. So,

I will stand here all night and however much longer it takes for you to forgive me."

There was no way I was walking away until Mark promised to give me a second chance. "Rachel -"

"I'll handcuff myself to you if I have to," I promised Mark.

He stared at me for a moment. "Do you own a pair of handcuffs?"

"Yes," I answered. Mark's eyes went wide as I realized how insane I had sounded. "That's not the point. The point is that I'm not walking away until you at least give me a chance to be your friend."

"My friend?" Mark asked, laughing.

It may not have been the most appealing offer in the world, but I firmly believed Mark would be a good friend. "Yeah. You were right that I went out with you to try and make Billy jealous," I admitted. Mark nodded knowingly. "I didn't listen to you or care about what you said because I didn't need to. You had served your purpose. But the truth is, you're funny and sweet and I'm an asshole for not giving you a chance. I'd like to give you a chance and I'd like you to give me one."

"As a friend?" Mark repeated.

"Yes," I said. Mark was still staring at me with a blank face but I could see that a smile with threatening to break out on his lips. "How about you ask me out again? This time as friends and this time I promise I'll listen."

Mark laughed, shaking his head at my misplaced confidence. "Despite what must be your worst attempts, I'm willing to give it a shot." I smiled at him. I could take a shot. "I don't know what it is about you," Mark said.

I shrugged, holding my hands up playfully. "I'm irresistible."

"So it seems," Mark admitted.

I grinned at him. "What do you say we make our first friendly activity

a game of beer pong?" I offered.

Mark nodded. "We can do that."

"You had better win," I teased.

"I can win a game of beer pong," Mark said confidently.

Somehow, I doubted that. I was a master of beer pong back in Florida. "You better. You're the star quarterback of Hawkins High. It would be an embarrassment if you couldn't beat me," I teased, linking my arm with his.

"I think I can handle you," Mark said.

"Stronger men than you have tried and failed," I shot back.

No one could handle me. It was part of my charm. I was a lot more complicated than I came off as. I wondered if it was a lesson that Billy would learn in time. Mark and I laughed as I grabbed his hand and pulled him to the beer pong table. It might be nice to have another friend outside of Billy, Steve, and Nancy. The beer pong table was set up near the edge of the patio. I noticed that Billy had moved outside with Tommy and some of their other popular friends.

My laughter from one of Mark's comments drew Billy's eyes to us. He scowled as Mark and I broke up, walking to opposite ends of the beer pong table. It looked like Tina was about to walk up with a rude jock named Reed. I scowled at him, motioning Reed away from the table. His eyes glazed over slightly as he moved off. Tina huffed, following him away. I had hated Reed since Nancy had confided in me that Reed had teased her about her 'movie' the prior year. Steve had redeemed himself for his actions. Reed hadn't.

"Aren't we supposed to have teams?" Mark asked, realizing that I wasn't planning on inviting anyone else.

"Scared to do it one-on-one?" I teased him.

"You're on," Mark replied.

The kids who were on the patio watched casually as Mark and I set

up the game. Every party I'd ever been to had beer pong tables. I rarely lost. Mark allowed me to make the first shot. I made my first one and grinned as Mark drank the beer. The game progressed steadily over the next five minutes. I made just over half of my shots. I was down to three cups and Mark was down to five. I noticed that Billy was watching me from behind Mark's shoulder. He winked at me as I made another shot. It went into the cup closest to me.

We laughed as I dropped to two cups and Mark remained at five. He was being a good sport even though he was losing. He hit his next two shots, bringing him down to three cups. I missed one shot before making my next one, leaving me with my final cup. Mark hit his next shot and then it was my turn. I missed mine and Mark made his. It left us even, each with one cup remaining. I made my final shot, ending the game after almost twenty minutes. The crowd went up in cheers for me as I laughed, crossing the table to Mark's side.

"Well played," Mark admitted.

I smiled at him, shaking his hand playfully. "Thank you," I chirped happily.

"I can't believe I'm saying this but I'm glad you decided to come," Mark said.

A smile formed over my lips. "I'm glad you decided to forgive me."

Mark nodded. "I don't think I had much of a choice in that matter."

I smiled. "I'm going to grab a drink. I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," Mark said, nodding his confirmation at me. I was a few steps back from him when Mark called me back. "Rachel."

"Yeah?" I asked, turning back.

Mark took a few steps closer to me so that no one could overhear us. "Whatever Hargrove says or does, don't let him fool you," Mark said. I raised my eyebrows, not understanding. "Everyone at Hawkins High knows he has a thing for you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

We may have gotten along and flirted a lot, but I couldn't buy that Billy had a thing for me. Flirting wasn't the same thing as liking someone. "Notice that not that many guys have asked you out," Mark said. I nodded, blushing lightly. That was nice to hear. "It's not because they don't like you. Everyone does. It's because they're afraid of Hargrove."

"Right. Thanks, Mark," I said awkwardly, unsure of what else I was supposed to say.

There was no other option but to nod and try to figure things out for myself. Mark nodded and walked off, knowing I had to think about things for myself. Once Mark had left, Billy walked back to me with a shot glass in hand. It was vodka. "For the winner," Billy said, handing me one of the shot glasses.

"Thank you," I said, taking it. "Should we toast?"

"What to?" Billy asked.

What could we toast to? I stared at Billy for a moment before smiling. "To the one thing that's made moving to Hawkins bearable," I said, grinning at him.

We exchanged a small smile as we downed our shots. I groaned in disgust at the cheap drink. Vodka wasn't my poison. I would have much rather drank whiskey, which didn't seem to be available tonight. Billy wrapped an arm over my shoulders and led me through the house. We walked into the kitchen, laughing about my beer pong skills. Billy insisted he could beat him. I snapped that there wasn't a chance in hell. We each grabbed ourselves a beer and headed back to the living room.

It had been well over an hour since we had arrived. The party was gradually growing louder and drunker as the night wore on. Billy and I sat together on one of the couches with the beers in our laps. "Will you tell me something?" I asked suddenly.

Billy glanced at me. "Depends on what you want to know."

"What's the longest you've ever kept a girl around?" I asked.

Billy thought about it for a moment. "How long have we known each other?"

I laughed. "Not even a month."

"It feels like it's been forever," Billy said.

"That seems like an insult," I told him, narrowing my eyes.

Billy shook his head. "Not at all."

Even though I had told him that it seemed like an insult I knew what he meant. It felt like we had known each other for our entire lives. We had become so close so quickly. I shifted toward Billy as the crowd around the couches continued to grow. More and more kids were showing up and Tommy was running out of room in his house. Billy and I were being shoved to the corner of the couch as a large group of football players and cheerleaders came inside. Billy took my arm and pulled me from my spot to sit in his lap.

"I guess the question is how long this will last," I said once we had settled in our spots again.

"I'm not giving up," Billy said.

"I'm not giving in," I replied confidently.

It was going to take a lot more than a few longing stares and teasing comments. Billy nodded slowly. "That's okay. I can be patient." I shook my head, giggling at him. "My turn," Billy said.

"Okay."

"What was your longest relationship?"

My longest relationship had been my only relationship. "I think it was about five months with the first guy I slept with," I told him. Billy hummed thoughtfully. "That's the only relationship I've ever been in."

"Really?" Billy asked.

"Yeah. It was kind of a messy end and I decided after that that I never

wanted to go through a breakup again," I told him.

"What happened?"

"You'll think it was stupid," I said. Billy nodded for me to continue anyway. "I was dating my first boyfriend, Jason when I was fifteen for about three months before we decided to go all the way. It was okay. I guess no girl's first time is great. We kept hooking up and had a good time doing so. After two months of it, though, Jason decided he didn't want me anymore and started hooking up with another so-called friend of mine. They spread all sorts of fantastic rumors about how pathetic I was in bed."

Billy shook his head. "He's an asshole. I may not always treat women well but I never spread rumors about what we do together." I smiled at him. I believed that. "You deserve better," Billy added.

"Thank you. It was kind of pathetic. There were so many people teasing me because of his rumors that I started... trying to prove people wrong," I muttered.

"Did you prove them wrong?" Billy asked.

"Do you think I did?" I asked him.

"There's no way you didn't," Billy said. I laughed, nodding my confirmation. "So, you've never dated anyone else?"

Dating wasn't for me. It had never worked out well. "I mean, I would go out on a few dates with the same guys sometimes or hook up with them, but as far as an actual relationship goes? He was the only one," I admitted.

"Would you look at that? We're a little more similar than you'd care to admit," Billy teased.

"Good to know that someone else has commitment issues," I shot back.

Billy laughed. "I'm committed."

"Being committed to sleeping with someone doesn't count," I snapped.

Billy lowered his hand to squeeze my ass. I jumped in surprise. "Sure it does."

"Don't tempt me," I hissed.

It shouldn't have surprised me that Billy was going to take me up on my offer. All he wanted to do was tempt me. I blushed slightly as Billy moved his hand further down my legs so that his fingers could play at the hem of my short skirt. I felt his fingers worm under the holes of my fishnets. I reached into Billy's jeans pocket and pulled out a cigarette, holding it for him to light. He pulled out his lighter, lighting it for me so I could take a long drag. Instead of blowing the smoke into the air, I leaned into Billy and blew it in his face.

We laughed at my boldness as we began watching the partygoers again. Many of the students were already plastered drunk. I laughed at the girls who were tripping in their high heels and the boys were drunkenly tumbling down the stairs. Billy's hands were tight on my body as we shared the cigarette. His lips were pressed against my throat as I sat back against the couch. I groaned as I turned to meet his eyes. Billy's eyebrows rose suggestively as I grinned at him. There were probably some empty bedrooms upstairs.

To my surprise, Billy had something else in mind. Billy rose from the couch as 'Shout at the Devil' by Motley Crue began playing. "How about a dance?" Billy offered.

My eyebrows shot up. "You didn't strike me as a dancer," I said.

Billy grinned. "There's a lot of things about me that might surprise you, Rach," he pointed out. I didn't doubt that. We all had our secrets. "Come on. Dance with me."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" I teased.

We knew that we wanted something more, but I could settle with a dance first. I'd always loved dancing. We didn't speak as Billy extended his hand to me. The crowd of students parted as we headed to the impromptu dance floor in Tommy's living room. I took Billy's hand and switched our positions, grabbing him tightly as pulling him onto the dance floor with me. Billy chuckled as we pushed through

the students. We had both attracted the eyes of the opposite gender and we knew it.

Maybe we weren't the nicest people in the world, but there was no doubt that we were attractive. I didn't know who my birth parents were, but I supposed I could thank them for my looks if nothing else. As I tugged Billy toward the middle of the dance floor I noticed that Nancy and Steve were swaying respectfully in the corner of the dance floor. I met their eyes, winking playfully. Nancy shot me a thumb's up as Steve rolled his eyes. I was about to take another step away from Billy when he grabbed me, yanking my body into his.

I'd always been relatively stable on my feet, but I couldn't catch myself this time. I stumbled into Billy's body but refused to let him throw me off. Instead, I wrapped my arms around the back of Billy's neck and pulled him into me. We were so close that our hips began grinding together. Billy's hands traveled down my body to rest against my rear as I rolled my body into his. We didn't speak as we danced, but we didn't need to. Our bodies and eyes were saying everything our mouths couldn't.

There was no doubt that we were dancing way closer together than anyone else on the floor was. The songs changed again and again as we danced but we never moved apart. We continued dancing, progressively getting warmer and warmer. I could feel the sweat running down my spine from the overwhelming heat; it was a mix of the body heat from Billy and the heat from the rest of the dancing students. Billy's torso was covered in the same thin sheen of sweat he normally had after a basketball game.

Billy's hands progressively tightened around my waist as we danced. At one point after the songs had changed at least ten times I turned to straddle Billy's legs, rotating my body over him. His hands grew so tight that they left visible red marks when I switched positions and turned my back to him. I threw one arm over the back of Billy's neck, pulling him up against me. His hips were against my rear and my spine was pressed against his torso. Billy made no effort to hide how much he wanted me.

I'd never been the best dancer in the world but I knew how to turn a guy on. Billy may not have been a good dancer either but he knew

how to use his body. His grip was tense but our bodies moved loosely. His breath was hot and heavy on my neck as I ground my rear against him. His hands were roaming around my body, gripping my thighs tightly and holding an arm over my stomach so that I couldn't move away from him. I turned back to Billy after a few minutes, meeting his piercing, heated stare.

It felt like we'd been on the dance floor for hours when we briefly broke apart. I smirked, backing away from Billy. He raised an eyebrow as I backed into Jason. He greeted me and began swaying to the beat at my urging. I kept eye contact with Billy as Jason placed his hands on my hips, low but far more respectable than Billy had. He looked furious. I knew that I should have learned my lesson the first time with Mark, but this was a little more innocent. Billy stared at me for a moment and let me go at it.

This was his version of a show. Jason and I danced, laughing happily as we swayed back and forth. Billy didn't break eye contact with me, even as I tilted my head back slightly to speak with Jason. I was barely listening to a word he said but he was serving his purpose. Billy looked furious with my games. He watched me for almost a full minute before losing his patience. Billy walked up and took me by the waist, pulling me into him so roughly that my wrist popped. Jason puffed up his chest in annoyance for the interruption to his dance.

"Get lost," Billy growled at Jason.

Even with a few beers in them, no one was going to stop Billy from getting something he wanted. Jason backed down at the angered look in Billy's eyes. "See you later, Rach," Jason muttered.

Damn Billy for the nickname. "Rachel," I snapped.

Jason was already halfway across the living room. Billy smirked proudly as I turned back to him. I smiled at him innocently. "Having a good time?" Billy asked me knowingly.

He was taking small steps into me. I wasn't sure what he would do if he caught me, so I stepped backward each time he stepped toward me. He knew that I was growing nervous, so he grinned as he slowly

backed me into the kitchen. "I was having a marvelous time," I said.

"You didn't learn your lesson the first time?" Billy asked.

"What lesson? We weren't on a date. We were just dancing," I said, throwing my head back to Jason. "That was perfectly innocent."

"I know you, Rach," Billy said. We knew each other better than I wanted to admit. "You're not that innocent."

"How would you know that? We've never done anything," I said pointedly.

"How long do you think that'll last?" Billy asked.

"That all depends on you," I teased.

Billy glanced up to meet my eyes. I smiled at him as he stepped into me. I stopped walking backward. Billy's body ran into mine but he didn't stop. Instead, he wrapped an arm around my waist and pushed me backward. I laughed at the fury in his eyes. He knew that I was playing with him. I hadn't hidden it. I looped my arms around his neck and ran my fingers against his upper spine playfully. Billy placed his hands on my hips and tightened his grip, lifting me. I grunted in surprise as he plopped me onto the kitchen counter.

Thankfully, we were the only people in the kitchen. Everyone else was dancing or playing beer pong. "Is there a problem, Billy?" I asked innocently.

Billy's jaw tensed. "You're my problem."

Good. I grinned at him, reaching to take the whipped cream canister that was sitting on the counter. I sprayed some into my mouth. Billy watched with dark eyes as I licked the edge of my mouth to wipe away the excess. "What did I do?" I asked teasingly.

If I wasn't a woman, I knew that he would have hit me. "You're a pain in the goddamn ass," Billy growled.

"Yet here you stand," I shot back.

Billy grinned. "How about a game?"

"Name it," I said.

We had come this far. I wasn't going to back down now. "Come with me," Billy said.

Billy's hands slowly moved up my bare legs. I swallowed thickly, hoping that he didn't notice. I giggled as Billy took a bottle of vodka from the counter to bring with us. Billy extended his other hand to help me down from the counter. I hit the ground and took his hand to pull him behind me as we moved through the party. I was glad that everyone else was too busy dancing or drinking to mind what we were doing. I knew that otherwise, everyone would be talking about our potential hookup later.

We walked through the living room to the set of stairs near the entrance of Tommy's house. I smiled as Billy took my hand and pulled me upstairs. I knew that we were going to end up in a bedroom. I wasn't sure if Billy wanted to play an actual game or if he just wanted to get me alone. I didn't care either way. We wandered down the hallway before walking into what appeared to be a guest bedroom. Billy kicked the door closed behind us. I watched him move around with my arms folded over my chest.

We stared at each other for a few moments before Billy reached into his pocket and pulled out a deck of standard playing cards. "Do you know how to play poker?" Billy asked.

I nodded. It didn't take a genius to know what he was thinking. "Strip poker. Classy," I teased.

Billy laughed. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to."

He smirked, knowing that we had just upped the ante. "If you're too -"

"I didn't say 'no,' Hargrove," I interrupted sharply. The two of us smiled at each other as we took our seats on the floor of the guest room. I shuffled the deck as we listened to AC/DC blaring downstairs. "You know how to play head's up?"

Billy nodded. "I do."

"Your deal," I said, hanging the deck to him.

Billy dealt five cards to each of us. I already had a pair in my original hand. "Draw?" Billy offered.

My hand was decent but I could have done much better. I thought about it for a moment before placing three cards down. Billy dropped two. I couldn't read his face. I didn't know if he had a better hand. I drew my new cards and Billy followed suit. I wound up with three-of-a-kind. It was a better hand than I'd started with but it still wasn't great. I looked up to meet Billy's eyes again. He had never tried to hide his thoughts before. It was stronger now. Harder than usual.

"Reveal," I said. Billy motioned for me to put my cards down first. "Three-of-a-kind."

Billy chuckled. "Two pair."

It meant that I had won the first round. "Start unzipping, Hargrove," I said confidently.

Billy laughed again as he took one of his boots off, chucking it away from us. We played the next round that Billy won with a flush. I had a terrible hand; I'd only had a pair. I took off my shoe and threw it to the side. Billy won the next hand too and I'd removed my other shoe. I made up for it by winning the next three hands. It meant that Billy lost his other shoe and socks. I lost the next hand and took off my first sock. Billy lost the next one and removed his jacket. I lost the hand after and took off my other sock.

Our normal clothes would have to start coming off. I wasn't surprised to lose the next hand. My best bet was a high card, which was a pathetic deal. "Running out of ideas?" Billy asked knowingly.

"I'm not worried," I huffed.

Billy watched eagerly as I unbuttoned my cropped shirt and slid it off my shoulders. "Not bad, Rach," Billy said, making it no secret that he was staring at my body.

"Enjoy it, Hargrove. It's the last time you'll see it," I snapped playfully.

"We both know that's not true," Billy replied.

He was right but I wasn't going to say it. We drained a third of the vodka bottle as we played. Our next hand was won by me. I grinned as Billy unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the ground. He knew that I was having a good time staring at his body. We played another round which Billy won. I thought about it for a moment before deciding to lose my skirt. Billy watched me with dark eyes as I was left in only my bra, underwear, and fishnets. My heart raced as I met his eyes.

We hadn't talked about where we would stop beforehand but I knew that we weren't going to end the game once we got down to our underwear. There was an unspoken deal that we were going to go all the way. We played another round that I won with a full house against Billy's straight. He stood up and unbuttoned his pants, kicking them off. I grinned and stared directly at his black-and-red checkered boxers. It helped that I could see the outline of himself against the tight-fitting boxers.

The next hand was easily lost by me. I stood up and sighed as I turned my back to Billy. I had to lose the fishnets so I may as well have made a show out of it. I hooked my thumbs into the waistband of my fishnets and slowly dragged them over my hips as I leaned down. I was glad that I'd worn the smallest pair of underwear I owned. Billy's eyes darkened as I pulled them off my toes and dropped them into the pile of the rest of my clothes. I decided to tease Billy again as I spun in a circle, showing myself off.

Billy nodded, looking like he was about to pounce on me. "Not bad at all, Winters."

My heart dropped. I knew that he was understating his reaction to not let my head get too inflated, but I was standing almost completely naked in front of him and all he could say was that I wasn't bad? "Not bad? That's all I get?" I huffed.

Billy grinned. "Until the next round."

We were both eager for the next round. I laughed as we drew our cards for the next round. We both took our turns exchanging cards and I grinned as I finalized my hand. Billy nodded for me to reveal first. "Straight flush," I said happily, placing my hand down in front of me. It was a nearly impossible hand to beat. "Beat that, Hargrove."

Billy nodded, looking impressed. It took me a little too long to realize that he wasn't impressed with my hand. He was impressed with his. My jaw dropped as he placed his cards down. "Royal flush." Well, I wasn't expecting that. Royal flushes were rare, especially with only two people playing. Billy noticed my hesitation. "You don't have to," Billy said quietly.

There was a tinge of sincerity in his voice that warmed my heart. He wouldn't force me to go beyond where I wanted to, but I wasn't going to let myself out of this one. "And let you tell me I chickened out? I don't think so. I've got nothing to be ashamed of," I snapped.

As eager as I was, there was a lump in my throat. I wasn't nervous to be topless in front of Billy. I was nervous about what would come after. I stood up and turned my back to him, feeling the heat spread over my face and down my chest. I reached behind my back and unhooked my bra. It snapped forward and I let it slowly fall off my shoulders to the ground. I glanced over my shoulders at Billy, who was leaning back. He nodded for me to continue. He was waiting for a show. I giggled as I turned to face him full-on.

Billy's eyes immediately dropped to my chest. My breath caught in my throat at what I knew he was thinking. He visibly swallowed. I was about to offer to play another hand when Billy rose. I didn't know what to say. Words seemed to have escaped me. Billy walked toward me as I nervously backed away. Billy stalked up to me until I was forced to back into the wall. Billy continued until he was only a few inches from me and then stopped. I wasn't sure if I was excited or nervous. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

We locked eyes as Billy approached. I knew that the little nod Billy sent me meant only one thing; I could tell him to stop and he would. I wasn't going to tell him to stop. Billy completed his approach as his eyes began moving down my body. My fingers began trembling slightly as he came close enough for me to feel the heat coming off

his body. Billy's eyes moved from my legs to my stomach and chest and back up to my eyes. I nodded at him that I was okay with this.

Billy reached out, pressing his fingers into my collarbone. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from making any noise. His hand slowly traveled from one side of my collarbone to the other, moving down my arm to come to rest at my hand. He took my hand in his and raised it over my head, pinning it against the wall. We didn't break eye contact as Billy used his spare hand to grab my still-free hand. Billy pulled it to his other hand, now holding both of my hands above my head. I was being pulled onto my tiptoes from Billy's grip on my hands.

My chest heaved rapidly as I stared at him. It felt like I couldn't take a full breath in. I felt Billy's spare hand rest against my upper thigh. It slowly moved up to my waist and over the waistband of my underwear before running up my bare stomach. I sucked in a deep breath as his hand moved to my bare chest. Instead of touching me where I most wanted him, his hand moved up between the valley of my breasts, resting against my upper ribcage. I was positive he could feel my heart hammering away.

My toes threatened to give out as my legs began shaking wildly. I blushed again as Billy's hands worked up over my collarbone and to my throat. He briefly held me that way. His fingers were pressing in enough to make me a little light-headed (though that could have been from the alcohol). It wasn't hard enough that there was a chance I would pass out from the pressure. Billy moved his face into mine. I breathed out heavily as I was desperate to kiss him. Just as I thought that he moved his hand off of my neck.

After the last few weeks, I knew I wouldn't get away without some teasing. Billy's hand moved back through the valley of my chest, again without touching where I most wanted, and over my chest. It kept moving down until it rested at my tattoo. My thigh muscle tensed as he ran his thumb over the tattoo. His fingers hooked into the black lace of my underwear as he met my eyes. I nodded my confirmation as Billy moved his face to mine. I could feel his breath fanning over my face as his hands loosened over mine slightly. Our lips were centimeters apart.

Billy's lighter grip gave me a little room to move. His fingers began dragging my underwear over my hips as our lips nearly brushed. It was at that moment that the bedroom door sprang open. Billy and I shot apart in shock. Billy moved to the door, only leaning down long enough to throw me his shirt to cover myself with. It seemed that we had been interrupted by another drunk couple looking to hook up. I turned my back to the stumbling pair to shield myself as Billy walked up to the couple.

"It's occupied," Billy snarled at the couple.

The girl stumbled back but the boy was still trying to enter. Billy shoved the boyfriend out and slammed the door shut behind them. This time he locked it. I breathed heavily, holding his shirt closed over myself. Billy walked up to me, his face flushed like I was sure mine was. "You couldn't have remembered that before?" I asked him sharply.

"Better late than never," Billy teased.

Fair enough. I laughed as Billy walked up to me. He grabbed me under the thighs and lifted me. I let out something between a laugh and shriek as he spun us, throwing me onto the bed. I laughed loudly as Billy landed over me. We smirked at each other as Billy took his shirt I was wearing and opened it, revealing my bare torso to himself again. Billy squeezed my waist as he grinned at me. He pushed my legs apart so that he could rest between them. He tilted my head up so that he could press a long kiss against my throat.

My heart began hammering in my chest again as he dragged his mouth down my torso. I had never been so excited about a hookup in my life. I had never met someone as forward with me as Billy was. He knew what he wanted and he went for it. Billy switched between pressing kisses against my body and dragging his tongue down my front. I blushed madly as he reached my waist. His fingers again hooked into the waistband of my flimsy underwear. I decided quickly and I wasn't going to let him stay in charge.

Using all of my muscle mass, I caught Billy's shoulders between my legs and flipped us so that he was underneath me. Billy laughed under his breath as I sat over his waist. "Something to say,

Hargrove?" I teased.

"If this is a dream, don't wake me up," Billy said, leaning his head against the bed.

I laughed as I reached to the floor and grabbed the bottle of vodka, downing a long drink. I leaned over Billy as he pressed his hands against my ass. "Not here, gorgeous," I whispered.

Billy's dark eyes snapped open. "What?"

"I don't need flowers and chocolates, but this is not happening in Tommy's guestroom," I said, motioning between us.

Billy groaned as he threw his head against the bed. "Really?"

"I promise I'm worth the wait."

"You had damn well better be," Billy growled. I laughed as Billy stole the bottle of vodka from me and took a long drink for himself. He glanced out the window. "Looks like everyone's clearing out."

Most of the students were beginning to pull out of Tommy's yard. "Okay. Are you ready to go?" I asked him.

"If this is as far as we're going," Billy huffed.

"Oh, come on! You know you like me," I teased, throwing my hair over my shoulders.

Billy grinned. "Unfortunately, that's true."

Somehow I doubted he would have normally continued talking to a girl who blew off a potential hookup. I smiled at him as we rose from the bed and started getting changed. I pulled my fishnets on, stumbling around as I did so. They had always been next to impossible to put on. Billy laughed as I tripped and fell, getting a cup thrown at him in response. I slipped my skirt on and hooked my bra back in place. I debated on putting my old shirt back on but settled instead on wearing Billy's. I tied it up in a knot at my chest.

I'd half expected him to try and take it back but he was just watching me with a smirk. I shrugged my shoulders playfully at him. "Keep it.

It looks better on you," Billy said.

My cheeks colored at the compliment but I tried to brush it off. "Duh," I said.

Billy changed back into his jeans and shrugged his leather jacket onto his torso. He tucked my lace shirt into his back pocket, letting it hang out. I grinned. It would look terrible to the others at the party but I didn't care. We both pulled on our shoes and turned to leave the room. Billy and I smirked at each other as we headed out. Billy wrapped an arm over my shoulders. This time I responded to the gesture. I wrapped an arm around his waist, placing my thumb in his back pocket. I noticed him grin to himself.

"I've never had to work so hard for a girl," Billy told me.

"You've had girls chase you for years. It's about time you had to put in a little work," I replied.

"A little?" Billy huffed.

Working for a girl once in his life wouldn't kill him. I laughed at Billy's annoyance as we passed Tina. She was scowling at us. I knew that she wasn't happy that Billy had dropped her. I pulled Billy a little closer as we passed her. "Had a good night?" Tina asked me bitterly.

"Better than yours, I bet," I shot back.

Tina looked infuriated by the righteous smirk on my face. Billy tugged me into him as we passed her and headed out. About half of the party had already left and most of the remaining students looked ready to go. The only people who were staying were the ones closest to Tommy and Carol. I looked for Steve and Nancy as we left but I didn't see them. Knowing Nancy, they had likely left a few hours ago. Billy and I had been dancing and playing cards for a long time. I would have to get the couple to dance with me another time.

It would have been impossible to miss the whispers and stares that were being flashed our way. I wondered if my relationship with Billy would be the next big rumor at school. It was likely as people were

curious about our relationship status anyway. It didn't bother me to be in the middle of a rumor anyway. I was used to it. I smiled up at Billy as we headed to his car. I knew that it must have been extremely late. My adrenaline from our earlier encounter had left me and now I realized just how tired I was.

A few minutes passed before we reached Billy's car. He opened the door and let me climb in. I dropped into the passenger seat as Billy climbed in on the driver's side and started the engine. Normally I would have been nervous about driving, but I knew we were okay. Billy wasn't driving drunk. We hadn't drunk that much for the amount of time we'd spent at the party. Most of Billy and my drinking had been done when we had first arrived. We hadn't needed alcohol by the end. We were drunk off each other.

We didn't get more than a few hundred meters down the road when I was shattered from the haze of the night, realizing that I hadn't brought anything with me. "Shit," I muttered.

"Problem?" Billy asked.

"I forgot my keys at home," I told him.

"Are your parents home?" Billy asked.

"Yeah. What time is it?"

"Almost three."

My parents weren't the strictest people in the world but they wouldn't be happy that I was waking them up in the middle of the night to be let inside. "Oh, they'll love that wakeup call," I groaned.

"You don't have a set hidden outside?" Billy asked.

That was the best way to get your house broken into back in Florida. "No. They were always too paranoid to do that," I told him. "God damn it. I'm going to get yelled at for this one."

"I've got an idea," Billy offered.

"Be my guest," I sighed.

"You won't have to go home and get yelled at."

"Bring it on."

"Are you okay with staying out?" Billy asked.

"All night?" I asked him. Billy nodded. "Yeah."

Billy drove on for another minute before pulling down a dirt road. We didn't drive for more than ten seconds before he pulled aside. I wondered if there was a motel or something on the road but it was empty. That was when I realized that we were near a hiking trail I had seen once. I had wanted to walk the trails one day when the weather was nice enough. Billy parked near the back of the dirt lot and turned the engine off. We were plunged into nearly complete darkness.

He was planning on having us sleep out here tonight. "This is your brilliant idea?" I growled.

"I didn't see you coming up with anything better," Billy shot back. That was fair enough. I would rather sleep outside for one night than get yelled at for the wakeup call. "Come on. We can stretch out in the back."

"Somehow you had this planned out," I groaned.

"I'm not the idiot who forgot their keys," Billy snapped.

We met eyes and I scowled at him as I threw myself into the backseat. If I was being fair, he was right. This was my fault. If I hadn't been in such a rush I may not have forgotten my keys. Sleeping in the backseat of my car wasn't my preferred place (I would have much rather been in my fluffy sheets) but I had slept in my car before. It was mainly when I had gotten too drunk at a party and couldn't drive myself home. Billy waited for me to shift into the backseat before joining me.

"Look at us, finally sleeping together," Billy teased.

It wasn't the kind of sleeping together I would have liked, but I supposed I would take this too. I laughed, shoving Billy's shoulder.

"Shut up," I groaned as we shifted into our places. "Watch the hands, Hargrove."

"No promises, Winters," Billy replied.

A light blush flooded my cheeks. I was glad that we were almost in complete blackness and Billy couldn't see my embarrassment. Truth be told, I wouldn't have minded if Billy had gotten a little handsy. Billy laid down first, closer to the edge of the seat. I slipped over him against the back of the seat and slid myself into the opening that Billy had left for me. He laid an arm over my waist as he turned into me. I placed my legs between his to give myself some room. We were scrunched up but I was comfortable enough.

It was difficult to believe that Billy was okay, though. I was shocked he wouldn't have rather been at home in his bed. "You're okay with staying out here tonight?" I asked him worriedly.

"I've got good company," Billy said.

I smiled at him. "Are your parents going to notice you didn't come home?"

Billy shook his head. "Nah. They don't care as long as they know I've got an eye on Max."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Don't know, don't care," Billy said pointedly.

I smiled again, tucking my face into his shoulder. "Goodnight, Billy."

"Night, Rach," he muttered.

My heart fluttered slightly as I closed my eyes. I was more comfortable resting in his arms than I had expected to be. Our breathing and the chirping of crickets was the only thing I heard. For a while, everything was still but after a few minutes, Billy's fingertips began running slowly over my arms. I began drifting off shortly after. I tucked myself a little further into Billy's chest with a small smile on my face. The thing I still wanted the most was to hook up with Billy but I was slowly beginning to realize that I wanted the rest too.

Since I was a small child I had always had vivid dreams. I didn't dream in full sequences though, my dreams usually came in flashes. It was no different tonight. There were flashes of a young girl with short dark brown hair. A flash of a wrist tattoo that read the number eleven. I was standing in front of the high school in darkness, unsure if it was snow or ash falling around me. There were flashes of red lightning in the clouds that revealed a massive shadow-like monster hovering in the background.

A particularly bright flash of red lightning caused me to jerk awake. In the real world, there was no red lightning. All I could see was the early morning sun. I groaned slightly and leaned up. It took me a moment to remember the events of the prior night and recall why I was still in the backseat of Billy's Camaro with him. We were parked not far into the woods which, in the daylight, I realized were very easy to see into from the main road. Billy had shifted slightly so that I was almost on top of him. He was still sleeping and looked surprisingly peaceful.

The backseat of the car was extremely cramped, but part of me enjoyed it. I wasn't going to tell Billy, but I liked the feeling of his arm resting limply around my lower back. Our legs were folded together and my hand was resting on his bare chest. As I started to shift around a bit, Billy began to stir. His eyes opened quickly after. They were hazy, just the way mine were when I first woke up. Billy's fingers began moving lazily along my spine.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," I teased.

Billy laughed. "Good morning."

His voice was deep and gravelly. It made my toes curl as I turned to rest my chin on his bare chest. His fingers moved up from my spine to work through my hair. I closed my eyes. "If you keep doing that, I'm not getting up," I warned him.

"I'm okay with that," Billy said.

That was surprising. I had expected Billy to immediately kick me away from him so we could leave. I smiled, rolling back into his body. It was ice-cold in the Indiana morning air. It took me a moment

to notice that Billy's jacket was draped over my shoulders. He must have given it to me last night before he had fallen asleep. I tucked one knee back in between Billy's legs. He smirked, placing a hand on my bare thigh. My other arm was running over his torso.

"Are you okay?" Billy asked, breaking the silence.

"Yeah. Why?" I asked nervously.

Was there something wrong? "You were muttering something in your sleep last night," Billy said.

Damn. I had been hoping I wouldn't do anything weird in my sleep. "What was I saying?" I asked.

Billy shook his head. "I'm not sure. It sounded like you were saying Josef," he said. I arched my eyebrows curiously. I didn't remember dreaming of a man. Billy grinned playfully. "Do you have a Russian boyfriend I don't know about?"

I laughed. "As if you'd care," I said. Billy shrugged, which I took as confirmation. "No, I'm sorry. It was probably part of my dream. I've always had these incredibly vivid and insane dreams."

Billy hummed. "That bad, huh?"

There was a time that I had been terrified to go to sleep. "Oh, yeah. My mother got so worried about it when I was little she took me to a sleep pathologist. They studied me all night but couldn't come up with anything," I told him.

Billy chuckled. "Even a case study can't figure you out." I laughed at him. "What do you dream about?" Billy asked.

"It depends on the night. Sometimes they're kind of normal and other times I think maybe I've seen Star Wars a few too many times," I said, making Billy chuckle. "I'm sorry if I kept you up."

"You didn't. It only lasted a few minutes," Billy said.

Strange. I hummed at him. It had been a long time since I'd had the kind of dream I had last night. "Thanks for getting me to come out," I

told Billy, wanting to change the subject.

"My pleasure," Billy replied.

"And for this. You could have easily told me to figure it out and have gone home," I told him.

"I'd rather be here," Billy said.

That was surprisingly sweet. I glanced at Billy's fingers where the marks had appeared the other day. They were almost healed. "Me too," I said honestly. We smiled at each other as I gently nudged Billy with my knee. "So, when's the last time you slept with a girl but didn't fuck her so hard she couldn't sit?"

Billy grinned. "Never. They get kicked out right away anyway."

"And me?" I asked.

Billy stared at me for a moment. "You're different, Rach." I smiled at him. I was finally starting to think that I might be. "What about you? When's the last time you slept with a guy without going to town?" Billy asked.

"Never. I've never slept with a guy," I said. Billy's eyebrows arched in confusion. "Not like that. I don't let them stay."

"What about me?" Billy asked.

"Try and find out," I teased.

Billy grinned. "Are you going to let me?"

"Worth a shot," I joked.

At least out here, we wouldn't be interrupted. The backseat of a car wasn't the classiest place in the world but we could make due out here. Billy smirked at me as he tightened his grip on my thighs and flipped us as I had done to him last night. I hit the leather seat with a grunt as Billy flung himself over me. His hands slowly wound up my thighs and landed at the knot I had tied in the shirt he had leant me. Billy untied the loose knot and unhooked my bra. My breath

shortened as Billy kneeled over me.

Billy's hand moved to the back of my neck and he yanked me upward almost painfully. I grunted as I leaned forward, allowing his shirt to fall off of my shoulders onto the floor. Billy tugged the bra off of my front, leaving me topless in front of him again. His hands were roaming everywhere but the place I wanted them to be. Billy reached for my hip and shoved me back against the seat. I knew that this wasn't going to be fast. We were going to be out here for most of the day.

Being out here all day sounded like a perfect plan to me. Billy leaned down against me to press his mouth against my throat. He trailed his mouth down my throat, over my collar, and down my chest in between the valley of my breasts. His mouth was following the same path his hands had last night. My hands wound their way up his bare back and landed in his curly hair as he continued down my body, coming to a stop at the waistband of my skirt. He began hiking the material up around my waist.

The skirt was almost at my hips when there was a knock on the window. I gasped in shock as Billy flattened himself over me, realizing that someone was outside the car. You've got to be fucking kidding me. My face was bright red as I looked at the window. It was Hopper. He was looking away to give us some privacy but was waiting for us to speak. Billy threw his shirt over me to keep myself somewhat modest. We pushed away from each other as Billy rolled down the window.

Hopper scowled as he looked at us. "You two again?"

"Hi, Hop," I greeted awkwardly.

"Go home, Rachel," Hopper warned. I nodded at him as Hopper turned to scowl at Billy. "No pit stops along the way."

"Yes, Officer," Billy said.

Billy's comment was respectful enough but I heard the anger in his voice. Hopper scowled at us he walked off. I smiled bashfully at Billy. "Well, maybe the fifth time will be the charm," I joked.

"I'll be making up for missed time," Billy said.

It had been weeks since we'd met. We should have already hooked up. I smiled at Billy, the blush working its way over my face. "That makes two of us," I said. Billy nodded and began fidgeting slightly in his seat. I glanced at his jeans and giggled. "Having a problem?"

"Want to give me a hand?" Billy asked, motioning to his lap.

I grinned. "No."

Billy didn't look happy with my refusal to give him a hand. He reached up and knocked me back against the leather seat. I laughed at his annoyance as I pointedly dropped the shirt to the floor. Billy's eyes went exactly where I was expecting them to go. I stared at him innocently as I moved past him and shifted into the front seat. Billy slapped my ass as hard as he ever had as I moved past him. I shrieked, dropping into the front seat. Billy chuckled as I turned back to scowl at him. He jumped into the driver's seat once I was in the passenger seat.

Once he was in his seat I leaned back and grabbed my bra from the car floor. I pushed the material onto my front, turning my back to Billy. "Give me a hand, will you?" I asked him.

At first, I thought Billy would tell me to do it myself. Instead, he pushed my hair over my shoulders. His warm palm rested open and flat against my spine for a moment. I had hoped that this was where it was going to go. Billy's hands worked down my spine slowly as goosebumps rose on my flesh. As his hands found their way to the waistband of my skirt, they moved forward to rest on my hips. I could feel his mouth press against the crook of my neck, gently nudging my head to the side.

A deep breath escaped my mouth as Billy slowly moved his mouth inward and up around the shell of my ear. He kept one hand firmly against my throat to keep my head tilted sideways. His other hand wrapped underneath the hem of my skirt to start pulling the fabric up. Any thoughts of Hopper and his warning to leave the parking lot were blown away by the feeling of Billy's hands and lips on me. That was what he could do. He could always manage to make my brain a

muddled mess.

Any coherent thoughts had left my mind a few minutes ago. I could feel Billy's tongue running along the vein in my throat as his fingers wormed their way underneath the fishnets that were covering my inner thigh. I reached back, grabbing Billy's thigh as I let my head fall back against his shoulder. To hell with waiting. Except for the very rare exception, I had never been a patient person. The haze of lust I had fallen under was broken and I was shocked back to reality when I felt Billy hook my bra back into place. He pulled away without a word.

I whipped around and was met with the pleased grin on Billy's face. "What the fuck, Hargrove?" I snapped.

"Maybe I'm not that kind of guy, Rach," Billy teased.

I laughed. This was my payback from him for not helping out his little problem earlier. "Go to hell," I barked.

Billy chuckled as I threw his shirt over my shoulders. He didn't stop me this time. Instead, he started the engine. There was an unspoken agreement between us that we needed more room than the backseat of a car anyway. As we drove back to the main road, we passed Hopper's patrol car. It was a good thing we'd chosen to leave when we had. We laughed as I leaned up and waved at him. I rolled down the window and folded my arms on the windowsill, resting my head on them. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling of the wind in my hair.

Billy's arm was resting on my knee as we drove through the backroads of Hawkins. We left the radio playing Aerosmith as we drove slower than usual. I knew that it was because we didn't want to leave each other's company. We had become very accustomed to having each other around. I eventually moved back into the car, putting my feet up on the dashboard and looking up at Billy, smiling at him. He grinned back at me, throwing his arm over the back of my seat.

The two of us chatted among ourselves on the way back to my house. I would have loved to stay out here all day but I knew that I had to

come back home for at least a little while. I didn't know how happy my parents would be that I had never come home last night. I had to hope that I could come up with a good excuse for my absence. We drove for about fifteen minutes before arriving in my neighborhood. Billy pulled up in front of my house. I turned to him and smiled.

"Do I still get my library date?" Billy teased.

"It's not a date," I snapped.

"Come on, Rach. We've already slept together," Billy teased.

I snorted, shoving his shoulders. "I'll meet you there at two?" I offered.

Billy nodded. "See you later."

It was impossible to resist him, even for a study date. I leaned over and kissed Billy on the cheek. Billy smirked at me as I climbed out of the car and shut the door behind me. I passed in front of the car and headed up to my front yard. I turned back and waved at him. Billy nodded and laid on the horn as he took off. I headed to the front door and gently pushed it open. My father's car wasn't in the driveway so I figured that he was out. My mother was, though. She looked at me as I walked in and smiled.

"That's not the shirt you left in," Mom teased.

"Mother!" I hissed.

She laughed, holding her hands up in the surrender position. "I'm not going to say anything or ask what happened. That's between you and him. I just want to make sure you were safe and didn't drive drunk," she said.

"No to both. We were okay," I confirmed, knowing that it would ease her mind. I wandered around the kitchen counter and grabbed myself some juice. "If it makes you feel any better, we just slept in his car. It was late and I'd forgotten my keys."

"That makes me feel much better," Mom said. I smiled at her. "What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

"I'm going to shower and change and then... I'm heading to the library," I told her.

"Alone?"

"Uh, I'm meeting a friend," I mumbled.

She didn't need me to tell her who I meant. "Tell Billy I said hello." I blushed at the look she was giving me and fingered at the hem of Billy's shirt. "And that he has a nice taste in shirts."

We both laughed as I hugged her and we moved along to enjoy our days. I headed upstairs to shower and change so that I could head to the library with Billy later. My mother walked into the living room and flipped the television on. As I walked into my room, I thought about my relationship with Billy. I was nervous to try and move into the next phase of our relationship, but I was determined to try. I couldn't wait any longer. The next time we were alone together, I was going to make the first move.

7. Chapter 6

After the night Billy and I had spent together at Tommy's party, it had been almost impossible for me to focus on my study date with Billy at the library that afternoon. I'd made the right move when I had told him that we had to study in public spaces for now. I had a hard time not blushing as Billy had stared at me pointedly and ran his fingers along my thigh. It was way harder keeping a straight face when I had noticed that Billy still had my lace shirt hanging out of his back pocket.

It did make me happy to see that Billy was taking my offer seriously. He didn't spend the entire afternoon in the library studying, but he had listened to me when I'd snapped at him to focus. He seemed to be trying at least a little harder than he had been in weeks past to get better grades. I knew that Billy was never going to be a straight-A student, but he did seem to be getting closer to averaging C's on most of his quizzes. I couldn't help but wonder if my promise was why he had been getting better grades lately.

The more that Billy and I studied together, the more that I realized that Billy wasn't completely careless about his studies. He knew what he was doing in all of his classes. He had to stop and question me about his problem-solving methods a few times, but he always kept working once I explained. If he would pay more attention in class, Billy could have easily been a good student with a mix of A's and B's. One look from Billy told me that I shouldn't ask why he didn't try harder in school.

We had spent hours in the library that afternoon and well into the evening, attempting to study but failing for the most part. I had kept my feet kicked up in Billy's lap while we had worked and it didn't surprise me that I felt his hands constantly sliding up my thighs. It also didn't help that Billy was constantly teasing me by telling me that we could study anatomy and chemistry, with some in-depth examples. I had warned him that I was going to punch him in the face if he didn't drop the subject.

On Monday morning, Tommy's party had been the talk of the school. I wasn't surprised that my hours-long vanishing into a

bedroom with Billy was the subject of much gossip. When I arrived in the parking lot that morning, I heard Tina and the rest of her friends laughing that Billy wouldn't want anything to do with me now that we had hooked up. I knew that I should have let it go but I had always had a big ego. Billy had been seated on the hood of his Camaro waiting for me to show up and I'd headed right for him.

Taking great care to ensure that Tina and the rest of her groupies could see what I was doing, I had pulled off my jean jacket which left me in a thin white spaghetti strap crop top and a tight mini skirt as I'd waltzed up to Billy. His eyes had darkened the moment he saw me as I'd pulled the cigarette from his lips and began puffing on it myself. I'd hopped up onto the hood of Billy's Camaro with him and laid a hand possessively over his thigh, tightening my grip pointedly.

My forward actions had shocked Billy, as I normally waited for him to make the first move and responded to those. Billy had been about to ask what I was doing when he had realized that I was throwing my relationship with him in Tina's face. Billy had responded by pressing a kiss against my throat and dragging my skirt as high up as it could go without flashing anyone. I was positive that Tina would have lit me on fire if she could have.

Unfortunately, the way that Billy and I had interacted with each other that morning had only continued to fuel the rumors that the two of us had slept together. I didn't mind the rumors much - I had slept with a few guys before and had every intention in the world to one day sleep with Billy. They could all think it happened earlier than it actually would. Billy hadn't done anything to quell the rumors either. Instead, he made it known that even if we weren't officially together, I was his.

Our actions toward each other continued throughout the early part of the week. I made it a point to throw my still-friendly relationship with Billy in Tina's face every chance I got. I knew that it infuriated Tina and that pleased me more than I could ever say. I always made it a point to slip my hand under Billy's shirt or rest my fingers in his back pocket whenever we were together. Billy knew what I was doing, of course, and he was more than happy to smack my ass or grab my waist whenever he was around me.

It didn't shock me that Mark came up to me on Tuesday and asked if the rumors were true about Billy and me. I had admitted to Mark that while we had fooled around, we hadn't slept together. Mark sweetly offered to put the rumors to rest but I had insisted that the rumors didn't bother me that much. Mark looked surprised that I didn't mind the image-damaging rumors but he had given up on trying to get me to stop them. The rumors did seem to help my popularity - with the male population of Hawkins, at least.

Though no one would blatantly flirt with me in front of Billy, I did find that the boys in Hawkins High School seemed far more interested in me now that they believed I would sleep with someone casually. It did amuse me that the boys would stop speaking to me and back away as soon as Billy would arrive. They were terrified of him and what he might do if someone started flirting with 'his' girl. Even though we weren't together, I didn't mind the possession. I felt the same way about him, after all.

Steve and Billy seemed to have formed a strong distaste for each other since Billy had arrived in Hawkins. I had noticed multiple times that if I was speaking with Steve, Billy wouldn't be far away. I knew that Billy wasn't threatened by Steve - as everyone knew that Steve was in love with Nancy - but the boys didn't like each other. I had asked Billy what his problem with Steve was, but he insisted that he had no problem with him. I knew that it was a lie but I also knew that Billy didn't want to talk about it.

I had figured by now that their distaste for each other was because Billy was, in his way, threatened by Steve. I knew that he had always been the king of his school. He wasn't used to being in a school where someone else was the ruler. Though that seemed to be quickly changing. Billy had earned the admiration of almost everyone in Hawkins. They adored him. I wondered how much anyone knew about him, though. I oftentimes wondered if I was the only one Billy was honest with.

Even Mark had mentioned that I seemed to be growing closer with Billy than anyone else in Hawkins had gotten with him. Mark had become much friendlier with me since our failed date last week. I knew that we were never meant to be anything more than friends. I was glad that Mark hadn't decided that I was the same horrible

person who went on a date with him for no other reason than to make Billy jealous. I had made a mistake, and I knew it, but I was trying to make up for it.

In the meantime, Nancy and I had continued to grow closer. We spent much of our free time together. Usually, when we weren't either with Billy or Steve, we were with each other. We spent most of our afternoons hanging around together and studying or just joking around. We were good for each other with what we had gone through lately. Within weeks of meeting, we now each considered the other our best friend in Hawkins. As much as I desperately missed Casey, I was glad to have Nancy.

It was now Thursday morning of the week after Tommy's party and the students had finally started calming down from the adrenaline rush of the celebrations. I assumed that it wasn't often they were able to get out and party. Indiana wasn't like Florida or California. They didn't have parents always out on business trips or big beaches that were seconds-long walks away from someone's house. Normally, my old high school would have already been preparing for our second big party of the year.

Today, I wasn't in a partying mood at all. I decided to be lazy this morning and wear a pair of low-rise cutoff shorts that showed the top band of my Ralph Lauren underwear. I knew that I would be scolded for it, but I didn't care. I threw on a black cropped t-shirt and my black bomber jacket over that. I slipped on a pair of combat boots and pulled my damp hair from its tie to allow it to air-dry. I only put on a quick swipe of mascara and lip gloss before heading downstairs.

Once I had grabbed my backpack and books, I darted into the kitchen. Both of my parents were sitting and eating breakfast at the dining room table. "Good morning, love," Mom greeted.

"Good morning," I said, hanging at the edge of the table.

"Do you want any breakfast?" Mom offered.

"No, I'm not that hungry. I will take a black coffee to go, though," I said, smelling the brewing pot.

"Here," Dad offered, barely looking up from his paper. He handed over his half-drunk mug of black coffee. "I'm not finishing this and better you take it than let it go to waste."

Fresh coffee would have been better, but I would take what I could get. "Thanks," I said, taking the warm mug from my father. I was about to walk into the kitchen when I realized that two train tickets were sitting on the table. I picked them up, staring at the dates and names they were assigned to. "What are these?"

Dad turned back from his paper and snatched the train tickets back. "Ask politely to see things, Rachel," Dad warned. I stared blankly at him. We stared at each other for a few moments before his gaze dropped to stare at my pants. It didn't take long for a scowl to grace his features. "Next time, I'm taking you shopping."

"You're the best father in the world, but there's no way in hell I'm letting you dress me," I told him. Dad scowled at me as I dropped into the chair next to him and picked up the tickets again. There were only two, which meant that I would be staying right here. "Going somewhere?"

"We were going to tell you. We're going into Indianapolis this weekend," Mom explained.

"Really?" I asked.

It would be the first weekend that I would have the new house for myself. It was very hard not to smile brightly. I already had a plan forming for this weekend. Dad took my silence the wrong way. "I have a big meeting in Indianapolis during the day -"

"And I wanted to see the city -"

"So, we figured that we would make a date of the evening," Dad interrupted, throwing an arm over Mom's shoulders. I smiled at them. I didn't have a problem being alone - as far as they were concerned - for the evening. "We're seeing 'Death of a Salesman' while we're there. The show doesn't let out until nearly midnight so we'll be staying in the city overnight."

Perfect. "Are you okay with that?" Mom asked.

"Having the entire house to myself for the night?" I replied, trying to force my voice to be more teasing than excitable. It was extremely hard not to shriek with excitement. I knew exactly what I would be doing Saturday night. Who I was going to do, more specifically. "I don't know how I'll go on."

My parents exchanged an annoyed look but they were both smiling fondly. "Okay, smartass," Dad said, whacking me on the knee as I laughed. "We just didn't want you thinking that we were abandoning you."

"Believe it or not, I think I can manage to entertain myself for a night," I teased.

"That does not mean throwing a massive rager," Dad warned.

"But a moderate rager is okay?" I shot back.

"Just don't get the cops called," he said.

Hopper would be furious if he had to yell at me again. He was already constantly yelling at me. I laughed as Dad shot me a playful wink. "Deal," I said, taking my mug and standing from the chair. "Okay, I'm going to head out."

"This early?" Mom asked, glancing at the clock.

"I've got a few books I wanted to pick up from the library before class starts," I replied. I was truthfully planning on cornering Billy and cementing my plans for the weekend. "See you later!"

"Have a good day!" Dad yelled.

"You too!" I shouted back.

I grabbed my schoolbooks from the counter and shoved them into my bag before walking into the kitchen and grabbing a thermos. I pouted the coffee from my father's cup into the thermos and took the rest of the coffee that was in the pot. Once I had screwed the lid on, I gathered my bag, threw it over my shoulder, and wandered into

the entry. I stood in front of our floor-length mirror, wiping away some lip gloss from the corner of my mouth and fixing my flyaway hairs.

It wasn't long before I saw Mom walk up behind me in the mirror. "What's Billy doing this weekend?" she asked curiously.

My face immediately reddened. I should have figured that my mother would have known what I was thinking of doing in their absence. "How should I know? I don't keep tabs on him," I said unconvincingly.

Mom smirked at my obvious discomfort. "Okay." We were quiet for a moment until Mom lowered her voice to speak again, ensuring that only I could hear her. "We're planning on being home around eleven. I'd go for ten-thirty to be safe," Mom advised.

My body went rigid at her warning. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I said stubbornly.

Mom laughed at my dishonesty. "Drive safe," she warned.

"Always. Love you, Mom," I muttered.

"Love you, too!" she called back.

We exchanged a quick hug as I grabbed my keys and sunglasses off of the counter and headed outside to get the hell out of dodge. It was a balmy morning outside that made my still-damp hair stick to my forehead. I was glad that I had stuck with minimal makeup this morning. It would have melted off otherwise. I walked to my car and threw my things onto the passenger seat as I started the engine and headed out of the driveway. I rolled down the window as I drove down the road, smirking to myself.

It wasn't shocking that my mother knew where my mind had gone as soon as I had realized that I would be alone this weekend. Thankfully, my mother also remembered what it was like to be a teenager. She knew that I was interested in Billy and that I was sick of waiting. I wasn't sure what sleeping with Billy would bring, but I knew that I wanted it. We had danced around our obvious interest in

each other long enough. We had to take the next step in our relationship to know what came next.

The possibilities that the weekend could now bring were sending excited jolts through my body. All I wanted to do was grab Billy and drag him off for a private moment. Knowing that we had an entire house to ourselves was making me all the more eager for the weekend. I couldn't wait. I was already wondering if Billy would stay overnight, but I also knew that I was getting ahead of myself. Knowing that I had to make it through the next two days, I tried to force myself to focus on the drive to school.

I'd made it halfway to school when I saw a figure in the distance. It looked like a young girl riding along on a skateboard. I stared at the figure for a moment before realizing that it was Max. My eyes widened. Did Billy force her to skate to school today? They lived as far away from school as I did. I peeled off the main road and headed toward Max, refusing to let her skate to school. It was a long ride and the morning air was way too muggy to be riding in. I pulled up to Max, who hopped off her board at the sight of me.

"Max," I greeted. "Are you okay?"

"Hi, Rachel. Yeah, I'm fine," Max said.

"Please don't tell me that your stepbrother forced you to skateboard to school this morning," I said slowly.

If that was the case, Billy was getting a smack over the back of his head. Max laughed, though I noticed that it didn't quite reach her eyes. "No. Billy's not going to school today," Max explained.

Naturally. "Ah." Something about her comment disappointed me. My favorite part of the school days was seeing Billy. Plus, I had been extremely eager to tell him about our weekend plans. "Is he playing hooky?" I asked curiously.

"No, he wasn't feeling well," Max said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Well, here, you don't need to skate the rest of the way," I offered. There was no way I would just take off

to school without her. I reached into the passenger seat and began tossing my things to the floor as I fiddled with the door handle, pushing it open for Max. "Hop in. I'll give you a ride."

"You don't mind?" Max asked.

"Nah. We're heading to the same place, after all."

"Thanks, Rachel."

A small grin turned up at the edges of Max's lips as she hopped into the passenger seat. "No worries," I said, nodding to the radio as I started back toward the school. "You can change that if you like."

'Anyway You Want It' by Journey was playing. "It's fine. It reminds me of Billy's music," Max said.

"I know he can be an ass sometimes, but he has a good taste in music."

Max laughed. "You know, you're probably the only friend Billy's ever had that would stop and help me."

It didn't surprise me that Billy had never had a friend who would have thought twice about Max's comfort or happiness, but that didn't change that it was unfortunate. "That's a sad thought. You're a cool kid, Max," I told her. Max smiled happily. "I'm not the biggest fan of kids, but I guess you're the exception."

Max laughed again. "I'm honored. I'm glad Billy finally made a halfway decent friend."

We rode in silence for a moment before a thought occurred to me. I could finally get some firsthand knowledge about Billy from someone who knew him. "Can I ask you something?" I said. Max nodded her confirmation. "What were Billy's friends like in California? If you don't mind my asking, what was Billy like in California?"

Max hesitated for a while before speaking again. I figured that asking what Billy was like wasn't an easy question to answer. "Billy's friends have always sucked," Max said. Judging by the fact that he

had friends like Tommy, I believed that. "He was always friends with the most popular guys and girls in school. They would be out until the early morning partying. I don't know, he's always been a dick but now he's just angry all the time. Almost all the time, I guess."

"Almost?" I asked curiously.

"Billy almost acts like a normal person when you're around," Max admitted. I smiled to myself, blushing as I stared out at the open road. "I think you're the only real friend he's ever had."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Billy might have always ruled the school but he had admirers, not friends," Max explained.

It was a thought that had occurred to me before; that I was the only person in Hawkins who had truly grown close to Billy. "There are a lot of people like that, I'm afraid. They don't want anyone to know their real selves so they put on this front and that's what people get to know. They become so accustomed to the fame and popularity that they forget about themselves. The real person underneath the façade."

"Billy likes you a lot."

My face flushed with color. It was a little odd to hear someone else say it. "Yeah, I like him too. Don't you dare tell him that," I warned her. "Billy's already got way too big of a head."

Max laughed and said, "Your secret is safe with me. You're good for him."

"Your stepbrother might be an asshole, but everyone deserves to have real friends."

"Yeah, I guess."

The conversation about friends had stirred some curiosity in me. I had never seen Max with anyone but Billy. It seemed a little odd that a young girl like her would have no one to hang out with. "If I'm prying at all, you can tell me to shut up. I was just wondering, have

you made any friends in Hawkins yet?" I asked as gently as possible.

Max scowled at her lap. "Not yet. No one here is worth the effort."

That was what I would have said a few weeks ago. I smiled at Max. "Oh, I see. I thought the same thing at first."

"Billy was the one who changed that?"

"He was," I admitted. Max looked shocked that her stepbrother was the reason I was now enjoying my life in Hawkins. "I figured everyone in Hawkins would be the types who never leave these small towns. No one would know what it was like to take long coastal drives or spend way too much money shopping in a big city. None of these people know what it's like to be pulled out of your life and dropped into unfamiliar territory. Billy does. So do you."

"Yeah," Max said quietly.

"We've got a lot in common."

"You're the only person I've ever seen Billy hang around so much," Max pointed out. "Normally, he doesn't hang out with the same girl more than once."

"So I've heard," I mumbled.

"I don't think he would stop hanging around you, though."

I smiled at her faith. "Thanks, Max. I appreciate that." Billy had a real friend in Hawkins now. Max deserved to have one too. "You know, my friend Nancy has a younger brother your age. His name is Mike," I said.

"He's Lucas's friend," Max replied.

It would have been impossible to miss the bitterness in Max's voice. I had to resist smiling at Billy's stepsister. "Lucas, huh?" I asked. I found it mildly humorous that Lucas was the boy getting to Max. "Lucas Sinclair, right?"

"Yeah. Do you know him?" Max asked curiously.

"I've met him once before. When Nancy and I first became friends she introduced me to her brother Mike and their friends. Dustin, Lucas, and Will."

"Do they seem a little off to you?"

A bark of laughter escaped my throat. "They're teenage boys. They're all off," I giggled.

Max joined in on my laughter a moment later. "Do they ever get better?"

"No."

Max groaned. "Something to look forward to."

From what I could tell, men never got much better. Not until they were at least thirty. "They do eventually learn that women are not going to tolerate their shit forever," I said, hoping I hadn't ruined Max's attitude toward love. I noticed something shift in Max's eyes at my comment. "Give them a break. From what I understand, they've had a rough year."

"What do you mean?" Max asked curiously.

"Their friend, Will, went missing last year. They found a body in the quarry that they thought was him. Had a funeral and everything," I explained.

"But they found him alive?" Max asked, shocked.

"Yeah."

"What about the body?"

"Mistaken identity, I suppose."

"That's weird."

"I agree. The weird ones make good friends though," I said.

"I wouldn't know," Max said bitterly.

Max was a young girl and she was at the age that she needed friends. I was hoping I could get her jump-started on the path to finding worthwhile friends. "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll be your first friend. Deal?" I offered.

Max smiled again. "Deal." We continued down the road for a while before Max's eyes shifted toward my wrist. "That's a cool tattoo," Max said, staring at the inked number one.

"Oh, thank you," I mumbled.

It didn't take long for me to start nervously wringing my hand around my wrist. I had never liked people commenting on my lifelong tattoo. "When did you get it?" Max asked.

"Uh, a while ago," I said noncommittally.

"Do you like it?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

How could I explain my feelings toward my tattoo that was my sole connection to my cloudy early life? "It reminds me of a kind of weird time in my life," I explained. Max hummed thoughtfully as we pulled into the school parking lot and I drove to my spot. We were some of the only people here this early. "What do you say? Shall we start the day?"

"Do we have to?" Max groaned.

It was the same attitude I had most days before school started. I loved learning but could have done without the stifling air of Hawkins High School. I laughed at Max as I shut the engine off and clambered out of the car. Max stepped out and closed the passenger door, tossing her skateboard to the ground as she turned to the middle school. I locked the car behind me as I decided to head inside. There was no point in waiting outside in the humid parking lot if Billy wasn't coming today.

Before I could head into the school, I called Max back. "Hey, Max! You need a ride home tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah. You don't mind?"

"Not at all. I'll wait out here for you."

"Thanks, Rach!" Max called happily. My eyebrows shot up curiously. Max must have learned the nickname from hearing Billy say it, as he was the only one who called me Rach. Max's eyes widened as she remembered that I didn't like the nickname. She had heard me snap at her stepbrother for it enough times. "Sorry, I mean _."

"No, it's okay," I interrupted, knowing that Max was embarrassed. "You can call me Rach if you want."

My offer surprised even me. I had never let anyone call me Rach until I had met Billy. I supposed that the nickname was beginning to grow on me. I gave Max an earnest smile, trying to reassure her that it was okay. "Thanks. I'll see you later," Max said.

"Have a good day!" I called after her.

"You too!" Max yelled back.

Once Max had skated away from my car toward the middle school, I turned to my school. I quickly settled on heading to the library first. I hadn't gone to the library inside the school yet and I figured that it might have been an interesting trip. Plus, without Billy hanging around I now had some time to kill before classes started. It was a good time to get some work done. So, I grabbed my backpack and slung it over my shoulder, marching into the school.

Only a few students were lingering in the hallway this early in the morning. I walked past them, throwing a few greetings to some acquaintances as I headed to my locker, tossing my books inside. I wasn't carrying them around all morning. I was about to close my locker when I stopped. Since I had the time, I would do it now. I grabbed my old notebooks from years past that I kept in my locker in case I needed to reference old material and brought them with me.

From the things that I needed for my morning classes, I kept my copy of War and Peace that I was reading for my AP Language class with me along with a notebook and pen. Once I was satisfied that I had everything, I turned and headed for the library. There was a set of double-doors that led to the library. It was larger than I was expecting. I thought about what I was doing for a moment before deciding to help Billy. I wanted to see him succeed and I knew that he couldn't do that without some help.

Since we were constantly together and studied frequently in our spare time, I knew Billy's schedule and what classes he took. It was work that I would undoubtedly end up helping him with anyway, so I may as well have done it now. I grabbed my old notes from The Great Gatsby, which I knew Billy was reading in American Literature. I starred the more important plot points for him. I also pulled out my notes on radicals, which Billy should have been starting today in Algebra II.

Though U.S. History had never been my best subject, I did take out my few pages of notes on the comparisons between Marxism and Socialism. According to Billy, that was going to be his next quiz and he was confident that he was going to fail it. Not if I had anything to do with it. Seeing as we were only a few weeks into the school year, I knew that Billy should have still been working on the classification system of plants and animals in his Biology class, which I had detailed notes on.

Once I was satisfied that I had gathered all of the notes Billy would need to study for the classes he had missed today, I placed the paperwork into a folder that I could give Billy later. If I got the chance - and I hoped that I would - I would pop in on him when I dropped Max off later. With ten minutes still to go until classes began for the day, I wandered into the physics section of the library. I didn't get much of a chance to browse before I nearly trampled a student as I rounded the corner to look for a book on string theory.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" I gasped as the boy I'd run into dropped his belongings.

It wasn't just books and notepads he had dropped; the boy also dropped a very expensive-looking camera. "No, it's okay," the boy

said, straightening up as he grabbed his things. That was when I realized that I recognized the boy I had just assaulted. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Is the camera okay?" I asked.

"It'll survive," Jonathan Byers said.

Though I had never spoken directly to him before, Nancy had pointed him out to me when I had first started at Hawkins High School. I met eyes with the nervous-looking Jonathan Byers and smiled. "Hi," I greeted politely.

"Hello," Jonathan replied.

"You're Jonathan Byers, right?" I asked, already aware that he was.

"Yeah. You're Rachel," Jonathan said.

My only assumption was that the rumors of my arrival had spread to Jonathan. I wasn't sure how much Nancy and Jonathan were still speaking. "I am," I confirmed. "Nancy told me about you."

"O - Oh, yeah," Jonathan stammered nervously, his face reddening. I smiled at him as he stumbled over his words, unsure of how to respond to me. Judging from what Nancy had told me about Jonathan, he wasn't used to people starting up conversations with him. It was obvious to me that Jonathan still had feelings for Nancy, which he hadn't realized yet that she returned. "I - I've you hanging around with her."

It figured that Jonathan was still watching his crush at least semi-closely. "She's my neighbor so she was the first person I met in Hawkins. She's been a good friend to me in the few weeks I've known her," I said.

"Nancy's good like that. She's friends with everyone," Jonathan said.

That was the truest statement I'd heard in a while. Nancy didn't seem to be able to make enemies. Everyone loved her. "She

mentioned that you two got close when your brother went missing," I said curiously. No one spoke much about Will Byers's disappearance. I noticed Jonathan jump at the mention of his brother. It didn't take a genius to sense the nerves coming off of him in waves. He was hiding something. "I was sorry to hear about that, but I'm glad you found him."

"Thank you," Jonathan said, swallowing thickly. "It's been good to have him back."

It would have been easier to let the conversation drop, but I wanted to know what was going on. Hawkins was a strange town and I had a feeling its strangeness connected to Will's disappearance. "Funny story, I thought I heard a rumor that they found his body," I said as gently as possible.

Even though I had tried to be kind about it, Jonathan nearly jumped out of his skin. "N - No. It was a different young boy from another town. He looked a lot like Will. I saw the body. It would have been easy to mistake them."

"I see," I said slowly. A brother who didn't know his sibling's body? Unlikely. "That's a fascinating story."

"Story?" Jonathan repeated.

Fear was prominent in his eyes. "Not a story. Sorry, that was a poor choice of words," I backpedaled.

Jonathan must have known that I was suspicious of his story as he seemed eager to end the conversation. "I'm - I'm sorry but I - I - I have to go," Jonathan mumbled, backing away from me slowly. "Can you tell Nancy that, uh, that I said... You know what? Never mind. I'll see you later, Rachel."

"Bye, Jonathan," I said.

"Goodbye, Rachel," Jonathan replied, backing away.

Jonathan Byers wasn't just shy; he was hiding something. It meant that Nancy was also hiding something. I didn't have much time to think about it now as, just minutes after the end of my brief

conversation with Jonathan, I heard the bell ring to signal the start of the day. I wandered toward my AP Literature class with only one thought in mind - Billy. Max had seemed nervous speaking with me this morning but she hadn't given me any clues regarding what was wrong with her stepbrother.

It would have been one thing if I had noticed Billy looking a little out of it yesterday, but he hadn't been. It was making me nervous that Billy suddenly wasn't in school when he had given me no indication that he wasn't feeling well before. I had seen Billy only hours earlier and he had looked as normal as ever. What had happened that had made him so sick in just a few hours that he now had to miss school? Did he have food poisoning? I had a terrifying feeling that it was something far more nefarious.

Though it wasn't a lingering thought, it did briefly occur to me that there was a chance that Billy may have just been skipping school because he was bored and had threatened Max to not dare tell anyone the truth. Something about that thought bothered me, though. If he was going to skip school, couldn't he have at least offered to take me with him? He had joked about the two of us missing school plenty of times before so that we could hang out together. I would have loved to ditch my classes today.

Throughout the day multiple people asked me where Billy was - notably Tommy and Carol. I made it as clear as possible that I didn't know and not to keep asking me. I snapped at Liam (a nasty basketball player on the team with Billy) that it was none of his business what was wrong with Billy. Liam snapped back that Billy must have been avoiding me now that we were hooking up since it must not have been that good. Liam hadn't liked me since I had flat-out turned down his offer of a date a few weeks ago.

It seemed that Billy's absence was the talk of the school, though I wasn't sure why. Was it that abnormal for students to miss school? I hated that I kept overhearing jokes from fellow students about Billy being too tuckered out from hooking up with me over the last few days to come to school. I tried to laugh off the jokes (even through the comments that were thinly veiled insults) but I found my nerves growing more and more frayed throughout the day. Something was wrong.

Any moment now I was sure that I was going to collapse from my nervousness. I was thrilled when the bell finally rang, signaling that it was lunchtime. At least now I could hang around with my friends and try to get my mind off of what was going on with Billy. I gathered my lunch while chatting amicably with Mark and Isaac (who had become much nicer to me since Tommy's party at Mark's behest). Once we had our food, Mark and Isaac cleared off to sit with the football players as I headed off to sit with Steve and Nancy.

"Hey, guys," I greeted, dropping to the table.

"Hey, Rachel," Steve replied.

"Hey," Nancy chirped. "Where were you this morning?"

"I went to the library," I explained.

"Oh," Nancy said.

"I ran into your friend Johnathan," I told her.

It would have been easy to let the conversation drop, but I was curious about the secrecy surrounding Will's disappearance. Nancy and Steve exchanged a stare that looked like it was a cross between nervousness and irritation. "Was that the first time you ever spoke to him?" Nancy asked curiously.

"Yeah. Nice guy. He seems a little nervous though," I said carefully.

"His entire family has been through a lot in the last year," Nancy reasoned.

No matter what the truth was regarding what had happened to the Byers, losing a family member (especially one so young) must have been a horrifying experience. "No, I know. He just got so jumpy when I mentioned that I'd heard Will's body was found," I said.

It wasn't just Nancy to react to my careless statement. Both Nancy and Steve's heads shot up. I stared at them as the couple exchanged a surprised glance before looking back at me. "Can you blame him? The guy thought he had to bury his little brother only for

him to come back from the dead," Steve said.

"Steve," Nancy chided sternly. "He was never dead, just lost."

"Lost in the woods?" I asked.

It was one thing to get lost in the woods. It happened to plenty of people. How did someone get lost in the woods, have a body that looked identical to theirs found, only to return a few days later with supposedly no memories? There was no way. "Yeah. Will doesn't talk about the ordeal much," Nancy said.

"Does Jonathan?" I asked curiously.

"No," Steve and Nancy said together, without hesitation.

"It's a sensitive topic," Nancy said, much gentler that time.

"Clearly," I chuckled.

"Billy's not here today?" Nancy asked.

It would have been impossible to miss how eager Nancy was to change the subject. It was another confirmation to me that the couple was hiding something. "No," I mumbled.

"Where is he?" Nancy asked curiously.

What was it with everyone asking me where Billy was today? I didn't have a tracker on him. "You know you're like the tenth person to ask me that today. Why does everyone assume I know where he is?" I growled irritably.

"You're the only person who seems to be real friends with him," Steve pointed out.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You've never noticed that Billy isn't friends with anyone?" Steve said. I stared at him blankly. Billy had plenty of friends. Within weeks he had become one of the most popular students at Hawkins High School. "He orders his guy friends around and doesn't speak

much to his female friends other than to shamelessly flirt with them."

"He shamelessly flirts with me too," I countered.

"But everyone knows he likes you," Nancy said.

It wasn't like Billy had tried to keep his interest in me a secret. "Right now, they're all laughing because they think I tuckered him out from sleeping with him," I growled.

Steve coughed up some of his soda into his lap. "Thanks for that image."

"Anytime," I chirped, grinning at him.

"Do you know where he is?" Steve asked.

"Home. Max said he was sick," I explained.

"Who?" Nancy asked curiously.

"His stepsister," I said.

Nancy's dark eyebrow raised. "I didn't know you knew his stepsister."

"Yeah, she's a sweet kid. She reminds me a little bit of Mike," I said. I wondered if Max would give Mike and the rest of his friends a chance to be her friend today. "I bet they'd be good friends."

Nancy shrugged. "Maybe, but Mike's been a little weird since El -" Nancy's voice immediately dropped off as she cleared her throat, the color draining from her cheeks. "Will," Nancy finished.

"El?" I asked curiously.

"Frog in my throat," Nancy said, her voice oddly high-pitched. "Will, not El."

Steve was nodding his agreement but he wasn't meeting my eyes. "Right," I said slowly. Now I was positive that the two of them were hiding something. What were they hiding, though? It didn't

make sense. If I was going to figure out the secrets of Hawkins, I was going to need some more caffeine. "I'm going to get coffee. Anyone want anything?"

"Can you get me a pack of Twizzlers?" Steve asked, draining the rest of his Coke.

The last thing he needed was more sugar. "How old are you?" I snapped.

"Please!" Steve whined.

I laughed and rolled my eyes as I stood from the table. "Sure."

The couple waved me off as I headed back to the kitchen. The moment that I couldn't hear them anymore, they pressed their heads together and began whispering again. I was about to zero in on the conversation when another voice called my attention away. "Where's Billy today?" Tina asked, appearing at my side.

"I'm not his keeper. I don't know," I growled, wanting Tina to be anywhere but near me.

A vicious grin spread over Tina's lips. "Did you finally manage to drive him away?" Tina asked happily. I curled my hands into fists so that my nails were biting into my palms. "Did he finally realize that you're not as hot as you think you are?"

"I'm going to tell you this one more time, Tina," I hissed loudly, turning to face her. "Get over yourself. You fucked Billy and that's all it was destined to be. He's not interested. Get a clue."

Tina's jaw was practically on the floor. "You're a bitch."

It wasn't the worst insult I'd ever had thrown my way. "Fair," I commented blandly. I turned to leave without another word, but I was barely a step away when Tina reached out. I assumed that she was trying to grab my hair and make our argument a typical chick-fight. We weren't playing that game. I turned back and grabbed Tina's arm in my hand, tightening my grip to the point that it must have been painful for her. I yanked her into me. "If you lay a hand on me, I'll break it."

Any rational thought I'd had flew out of my head as I tightened my grip on Tina's arm even further. I could hear the breath of air and whimper of pain escape Tina's throat. I knew that it wasn't a smart move on my part, but I was so sick of people like Tina. She needed to be put in her place. All it would have taken was one little flick of the wrist and I could have shattered the bones in her hand. Tina tried to pull away from me with fear in her eyes. It was only when the ceiling lights in the cafeteria began to flicker that I released her.

Hawkins couldn't become like my home in Florida... I couldn't do it again... Tina let out a sharp breath of air as she stumbled a few steps back away from me. Tears were building in her tear ducts as she cradled her hand carefully. I hadn't done any permanent damage, but she was afraid. The flickering lights evened out as I took a step back. The cafeteria had grown completely silent as the students were staring wildly between us. My vision was flashing red as I quickly realized that I had to leave.

I needed to get somewhere I could be in private. With my eyes pointedly aimed at the ground, I fled from the cafeteria as quickly as I could and practically threw myself into the girl's bathroom in the hallway. I slammed the door closed behind me as I leaned breathlessly against a sink. My eyes were shimmering white as I tried to blink away the appearance, willing myself to return to normal. I began repeating a mantra that I had known as long as I could remember; perhaps the only remnant I had from my birth parents.

"Чемú быть, того не миновать. Чемú быть, того не миновать."

I'd been muttering to myself for nearly two full minutes when the bathroom door slowly opened. I stopped speaking immediately. "Rachel," Nancy called, carefully pushing into the bathroom and closing the door carefully behind her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, releasing my white-knuckle grip on the sink. Calm down, Rachel... Make sure Nancy doesn't get suspicious. I cleared my throat and checked my reflection in the mirror. I was beginning to regain my normal appearance. "Sorry, just had a weird moment there."

"Eh. Everyone's wanted to punch Tina at some point or another,"

Nancy said carelessly, making me laugh. I appreciated that she was trying to make me feel a little less awkward. "Here's your coffee. Decaf. I thought you might need it."

Nancy extended her hand as I grabbed the cup of coffee. "Good call on making it decaf. Thanks," I said.

"Sure," Nancy said. We stood together in silence for a moment as I focused on my breathing, trying to even it out. When Nancy spoke again, I noticed how careful her words were. "Were you speaking Russian?"

"Uh, yeah. It's an old proverb," I said slowly.

"What does it mean?" Nancy asked curiously.

"You can't avoid that which is meant to happen," I explained. Nancy arched a dark eyebrow. "I remember hearing it as a kid and... I don't know. It's always made me feel better."

"It's a good saying," Nancy said reassuringly. She must have known that I was nervous that she'd caught me speaking Russian. They weren't the most trusted country in the world lately. "Just be careful that people don't hear you speaking Russian these days."

"Yeah," I agreed, laughing humorlessly. "What's it like out there?"

Normally, it was easy to hear the chatter from the lunchroom even inside the bathroom. I couldn't hear anything now. I figured they were all still shocked by what had happened. They would start whispering and rumors would be rampant around the school in a few hours. "Quiet. People are trying to figure out what happened," Nancy explained. I let out a deep breath. The cafeteria would fall silent again the moment I walked out of the bathroom. "It's going back to normal, though. You're not the first person to fight at lunchtime."

"Good to know," I laughed awkwardly.

Nancy and I exchanged a small and only somewhat awkward smile. The smile on Nancy's face dropped quickly. "Oh, Rachel. Your nose is bleeding," Nancy said worriedly, stepping into me.

"Shit," I groaned, turning back to the mirror. She was right. There was a thin stream of blood running out of my left nostril. I'd been hoping that the nosebleed side effect would stop as I grew older. "Yeah, I hit my nose on the door when I yanked it open."

It wasn't my best lie, but I didn't have time to think about it. "Right," Nancy said slowly, handing me a paper towel. She stared at me curiously as I dabbed away the blood, waiting for the stream to stop running. In the reflection of the mirror, I noticed that Nancy's eyes had dropped to my wrist. "That's a cool tattoo."

Nancy's voice wreaked of suspicion. "Evidence of poor life choices," I chuckled awkwardly.

The air had shifted a few moments before. Something had occurred to Nancy and I wasn't sure what it was. "Rachel," Nancy said. Her voice wavered with nerves. I turned from the mirror to meet her eyes. "Did you do that? The lights?"

Why would she have jumped to that very correct conclusion? I laughed awkwardly, shaking my head as I ran my fingers through my tangled hair. "Nance, I can't make the lights flicker. We're not in a sci-fi movie," I said as convincingly as possible. Nancy didn't look any more convinced than she had been a moment before. "It's windy out today. I'm sure it's messing with the power grid."

Nancy laughed nervously, shaking her head. "You're right. I'm sorry, I guess I'm a little out of my mind these days," Nancy breathed out, shaking her head. She looked as nervous as I had been when I'd first walked into the bathroom. "We're coming up on the year anniversary of Barb's disappearance."

As sorry as I felt for Nancy, I didn't believe that her question was because of Barb. She had seen what I'd done before. The question remained though; where had she seen it? "I get it, Nance. I'm sorry about Barb," I said, desperate to change the subject.

"Thanks," Nancy said. I could figure out where her suspicion was coming from later. "It's just taking me more time than I expected to get used to it."

"Of course."

"Everyone seems to have just forgotten about her."

The pain in Nancy's voice made me briefly forget what had just happened. "Just because Barbara wasn't popular doesn't mean she deserves to be forgotten," I said honestly, resting a comforting hand on Nancy's shoulder. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Nancy smiled. "Thank you, Rachel."

"Thank you for the coffee and for coming to check on me," I said, taking a sip of the warm drink. "I'm okay, I promise."

"Good," Nancy replied as the bell rang to signal the start of classes. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," I said.

For once, I was desperate to do some mindless classwork to get my mind off of what was happening. Nancy handed me my bag (which she had brought with her) and we walked out of the bathroom together. The cafeteria noise faltered for a moment as the students stared at me. Steve joined us but didn't speak as we walked, sensing that I wasn't in the mood. Even though no one was talking, it didn't change that they were all looking at me. One sharp glare from me got everyone to go back to what they had been doing before.

We ended up making it into the hallway before I was cut off by Mark. Steve and Nancy backed away to let us have a moment. "You know, I would have paid good money to see you break Tina's wrists," Mark said comfortingly.

I laughed dumbly. "Thanks, Mark."

"Everyone else would too," Mark added quietly. I laughed again. "But now they all think you're some kind of alien."

"What makes you think I'm not?" I shot back. There were some days I thought I was an alien. It was the only thing that made sense. We exchanged a small giggle as I tried to brush off the curiosity over

what had happened. "It's a public school. Who can be surprised that we have faulty wiring?"

"Exactly," Mark said.

Even though Mark seemed to buy into my lie without hesitation (as it could have easily passed for the truth), and I was certain that the rest of the school would follow in his thought process within a few hours, I could tell that Nancy and Steve were more hesitant. I wasn't sure how they had put the truth together when they had only known me for a little over a month. The only thing I could think of was that it was because they had seen someone like me before. Could it have something to do with Will Byers's disappearance?

The remainder of the school day went by in what felt like a flash. Fellow students spoke to me and teachers asked me questions, but I was stuck in thought from what had happened in the cafeteria. I knew that I had to be careful. My emotions played a massive role in the secret I carried and they had been tested today. If I wasn't careful, it would only be so long before I blew my big secret to Hawkins. I couldn't do that. Not again. Not when I was just starting to like this town.

I spent a lot of the day wondering what the link was between Will Byers's disappearance and Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve's awkwardness when I brought up the situation. It didn't make sense that only the three of them knew something about Will's vanishing that no one else did. The entire case didn't make sense. The Byers would have known their son's body. How did they mistake it for someone else's? Who was the boy that was buried? The pieces of the puzzle didn't fit.

It didn't help my nerves to know now that Nancy was getting suspicious of me. I couldn't figure out how she knew about me or why she wasn't buying into the lie that the rest of the school had bought into. I wondered again if it had something to do with Will's disappearance. Nancy had seemed suspicious about everything - the nose bleed, the flickering lights, the wrist tattoo, and my Russian whispering. They were strange things for someone to be suspicious about.

The only thing that made me feel any sense of normalcy throughout the day was the students in the school were speaking eagerly about the near-fight between Tina and me. I knew that people were betting on who would have won the fight if we had come to physical blows. I was glad that it seemed that most students believed that I would have won the fight - which I believed too. I ended up spotting Tina from across the hallway as the bell rang to dismiss us for the day. She curled up and shrank away from me as I passed.

Before the end of the day, I stopped at the front office and collected Billy's homework from his classes. The office clerk stared at me for a moment when I asked for his missed work and asked me if I was his family (of which the thought nearly made me vomit) but I insisted that I was just a friend who was bringing his stepsister home and would have her deliver it. Once I had collected his paperwork, I headed to the parking lot, chatting as mindlessly as I could with Nancy and Steve.

"See you tomorrow, Rachel!" Nancy called as we passed Steve's car.

"Bye, Rachel!" Steve yelled.

"Bye, guys!" I shouted back. I exchanged a hug with the couple before turning around and walking to my car, where Max was already standing. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Max said.

"How was your day?" I asked as we jumped into the car.

"Nothing special. How was yours?"

"I almost got in a fight."

Max's gaze shot up from her lap. "With who?"

"A girl named Tina."

Max knitted her eyebrows for a moment before she began giggling. I glanced at her curiously. "She went on a date with Billy

once," Max explained.

Even Max knew that the two of them had gone out. Hopefully, she didn't know what the two of them had done. "Yeah. She's very fond of your stepbrother and not fond of me at all," I said.

"She likes him?" Max asked.

I imagined she didn't understand why anyone liked her stepbrother. "She does," I said.

Max snorted under her breath. "He doesn't like her. He much prefers your company."

My face began burning with embarrassment. I was happy to hear that Billy preferred my company (which I'd already known), but it was strange to realize that even his stepsister knew. "Good," I said, trying to keep my smirk as covered as possible. "He's had her over to your house though."

Max shrugged. "Only because no one was home."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Max's face paled; she looked horrified that she had mentioned her family. Maybe I would be able to get information about her family out of her considering I couldn't get anything out of Billy. "Our family is kind of crazy. Billy wouldn't want anyone to see it," Max said.

Her voice was low, almost as if she was hoping that I wouldn't hear her. "We all have crazy families," I said as comfortably as possible.

"I guess," Max muttered.

Sensing that Max didn't want to talk about her family any longer, much like Billy would shut down when I tried to bring up their family, I changed the subject. "What games do you play when you go to the arcade?" I asked, trying to play to her interests.

"Whatever's open, but my favorite is Dig Dug," Max said.

Having never been much of a gamer, I had no idea what Dig Dug was. I laughed at the silly name of the video game. "What's that one?" I asked curiously.

"You've never played Dig Dug?" Max asked disbelievingly.

"I've never actually been in that arcade. Your stepbrother can be a little distracting," I mumbled.

Why? Why would you have said something like that to a little kid? Max's face lost all color as mine burned red. Fucking idiot... I couldn't believe I had just mentioned my relationship with Billy to his younger stepsister. "Ugh, I do not need to hear that," Max said, thankfully laughing at my comment.

"Agreed," I said, desperate to change the subject. "Tell me about Dig Dug."

"You have to defeat all of the enemies in each stage by either inflating them with air with a pump until they pop or crushing them underneath large rocks," Max explained.

Even though I tried hard to stop myself, I began laughing uncontrollably. For a game that had won so many awards, it seemed like such a stupid idea. "That's the whole game?" I asked.

"It's fun!" Max insisted.

It still seemed like a silly idea. "Maybe I'll have to come by one weekend and check it out," I said. A small smile appeared on Max's face. She just needed a friend. "Would you teach me how to play?"

"Yeah," Max said happily.

"I'm hopeless with video games," I warned her.

"So, you'll be easy to beat," Max teased.

"That's how it's going to be, huh?" I replied.

Max laughed with me as we turned down the road to her house. "Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Sure."

"What are you and Billy to each other?"

It was a question that had often occurred to me. I didn't know what we were and I was too cowardly to ask Billy. "Oh, man. I wish I had a better answer for you, Max. I don't know what we are. I like your stepbrother a lot. I like him more than I've liked any guys in a long time. I've got a vague feeling that he may feel the same way toward me, but I'm not positive." I stopped long enough to gauge Max's reaction, but she didn't give me one. "We haven't said what we are to each other. For now, I think we're just friends."

"But you want to be more?" Max asked.

"Um, yeah, I think I do," I muttered stupidly.

"You should make the first move," Max said confidently.

"In your professional opinion?" I teased.

Max laughed. "Yeah."

For someone who claimed that she couldn't stand her stepbrother, it was interesting that she was so invested in his love-life. "Why do you want us together?" I asked. Max stared ahead and didn't answer me. It was okay, I already knew the answer. "You don't have to admit it."

"Admit what?" Max asked curiously.

"That you want Billy to be happy," I said.

Max glanced at me before looking back at her lap. "I don't think he's ever been with a girl he cared about."

"No?" I asked. Max shook her head. "He mentioned to me at a party that I was the longest girl he'd ever kept around. I'd like to not have that dynamic change if we... get together."

Max snorted through a laugh. "Rach, I know what Billy does when he's alone with a girl."

That was a horrifying thought; having Max know what her stepbrother and I were bound to do. Don't scar the girl even more than Billy likely already has. "Remind me to always call Billy to my house," I chuckled.

"No worries," Max said, making us both laugh. "This is me." I pulled into Max's driveway. "Thanks for the ride."

"Not a problem." I was about to let her go when I remembered that I had brought Billy's work with me. "Wait. Before you go, Max, I have some things for Billy," I said. Max stopped short of closing the door. "Can I bring them to him?"

Max stammered nervously for a moment. Her reaction reminded me a lot of the one that Billy gave whenever I asked about his family. I didn't miss her check the driveway for other cars. Only Billy's was there. "Sure. I'll, uh, check with him that he's okay for visitors," Max said.

"Okay."

The two of us climbed out of my car and walked up to the front door together. Max was fumbling for her keys when the front door sprang open. Max and I both jumped back in surprise to see Neil Hargrove at the front door. "Neil," Max greeted tensely.

"Maxine," Neil greeted coldly. His eyes tracked over to me. "Who's your friend?"

"We've met," I interrupted whatever Max was about to say. He didn't need to bully a twelve-year-old girl. "My name is Rachel. I'm a friend of your son's and I gave Max a ride home today."

"Thank you for getting her home safely. Have a good evening," Neil said abruptly.

It was obvious that he wanted to get rid of me. "I just have a few school things for Billy," I said.

"We can take them," Neil said, extending his hand.

As Neil took a step toward me, I tightened my grip on the

paperwork. "Neil, can you check on the stew?" Susan Hargrove, a pretty red-headed woman asked. She stepped past her husband to put herself between us. I didn't miss the nervous smile on Susan's face and the pointedly calming tone of her voice. "I'll take care of this."

Neil sent me a heated glare but said, "Sure."

"You must be Rachel," Susan said, sending me a warm smile as her husband walked away.

"That's me," I said, shaking Susan's hand. "I'll be quick -"

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Susan said, stepping in front of me. Her eyes briefly flickered to reveal a terror hidden underneath her warm exterior. "Billy isn't feeling well and we don't want to accidentally pass anything to you. I couldn't forgive myself and I'm sure Billy wouldn't either."

Max sent me a sad smile as she extended her hands to take the paperwork. "I'll make sure he gets everything."

"Okay. Thanks, Max," I said, handing everything to her. "Uh, so you know, it's all of the classwork he missed today, and I put in all of my notes from old classes I took that I thought might be careful. My phone number is on top too; he can call if he has any questions."

A small smile worked its way over Susan's face. "This was very sweet."

"It was no big deal," I countered. The awkward air between the three of us was stifling. I knew that it was time to leave. "Give Billy my best, please."

"We will," Susan promised.

"Bye, Rach," Max said.

"Night, Max. It was nice to meet you, Susan," I said, waving at the women.

"You too, Rachel," Susan.

The three of us exchanged small smiles as I turned away. I noticed Susan trying to quickly usher Max into the house. I tried to keep my worrying to a minimum as I walked back to my car. I hadn't even seen Billy. I was hoping that I could at least get a glimpse of him before leaving. The Hargrove house was eerily silent as Susan closed the door behind them. I hoped that I hadn't gotten anyone in trouble as I clambered back into my car, starting the engine and heading back to my house.

No matter what I did, my thoughts kept drifting back to Billy. I had felt that nervous twisting in my gut before whenever Billy's family was mentioned. I remembered being nervous when I saw the bloody cuts and bruises on his knuckles at school. I remembered the venomous look Neil Hargrove had shot his son when Billy and I had been caught in our water fight. I remembered the tenseness in Billy's voice whenever he spoke about his family.

The brief meeting today had been enough to confirm for me that the relationship between the Hargrove family must have been a terrible one. I had never seen three people look so awkward. Max had looked terrified, Susan had looked like a scolded puppy, and Neil had looked like a hulking dragon defending its castle. I wondered what the relationship between Neil and Billy was like when they were home together, just the two of them. The thought of what likely happened made my stomach churn.

All of my never-ending thoughts about Billy's family eventually managed to make my thoughts shift to my family. Not the family that had raised me that I loved so much, but the ones who had brought me into the world. I had never asked my parents much about my birth family, but I had found myself steadily growing more and more curious. From my strange tattoo, horrifying dreams, and odd abilities, I knew most of my secrets could only be answered by my birth family.

After some debating, I decided resolutely that I was going to ask my parents about my birth family tonight. It was time that I knew where I had come from. I needed to know, especially as my abilities and dreams seemed to be going haywire. It had been particularly bad since our family had moved to Hawkins, which didn't make any sense. I pulled into the driveway of my house and grabbed my things,

closing the car door, and walking into my house.

Dad wasn't home yet but Mom was standing in the kitchen beginning dinner. "Hi, honey," Mom greeted. "Good day?"

"Uh, it was an interesting day," I said. Now or never, Rachel. Say something before you chicken out. "Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course. Does this have to do with Billy?" Mom asked, smiling broadly.

Maybe I was getting predictable. "No, actually, this time it has nothing to do with Billy and everything to do with us," I said. Mom raised a brow as she put down her cookware, focusing her attention on me. "I don't want you to think that this reflects poorly on you or that I don't love you and Dad. You're the best parents I could have asked for -"

"Rachel, we always assumed this day would come where you would want to know about your birth family," Mom interrupted, smiling at me fondly.

"I'm sorry," I said awkwardly.

It felt so awkward talking about the people who had brought me into the world with the people who had raised me. "Don't be sorry. We all deserve to know where we come from," Mom said pointedly. I nodded at her as she motioned for me to follow her into the dining room. "I wish I had more to tell you than I do. Sit." I took a seat next to her. "We adopted you from the Children's Home Society when you were three-years-old."

"No, I know the story of my adoption," I interrupted. I knew where they had gotten me from and I knew what had happened from the moment they had adopted me. "What do you know about my birth parents?"

Mom shook her head. "Not much. You were left at the doorstep of the orphanage in the middle of the night a few weeks before we adopted you. No one was there when they found you in the morning

and by all indications, whoever had left you there had been gone hours already."

"That's it?" I asked.

It wasn't worth it to ask if that was all she knew. "They did leave a note," Mom said quietly.

"What?" I asked, surprised.

My parents had never told me anything about a note that had been left. I thought I'd been left on the doorstep of the orphanage with nothing. Mom rose from the table and pulled out a piece of paper that was yellowed and worn from time. I could see the black ink on the other side. "It was pinned to your blanket. I never mentioned it because... well, it's written in Russian, first off," Mom explained.

"Russian? I've always been able to read and speak Russian," I countered.

Though I couldn't remember ever learning Russian, I'd always known it. "I know. It's likely a skill you retained from your early childhood," Mom explained.

"Why haven't I seen that letter before?" I asked curiously.

If my birth parents had left me some reminder of who they were, I wanted to know. "It's the ramblings of a madman. I sat with your father one afternoon and translated it. It makes no sense. It's a fantastical tale told by someone who was highly delusional. I didn't want to scare you when you were young," Mom reasoned.

"Can I have it?" I asked curiously.

Mom nodded. "Of course. It's yours," Mom said, handing the letter over. "Try not to dwell on it, okay?"

"Yeah, I won't."

"Can I make you a cup of tea while you read it?"

"Yeah. Thanks," I mumbled.

The letter slipped from my shaky hand the first time I tried to open it. Mom knew that I needed some privacy to read the letter so she smiled and stood from the table, walking into the kitchen and pulling out a mug as she began to brew us a pot of tea. It looked like she was moving slower than normal to give me a chance to read it. I slowly slit the letter open, breathing out shakily as I did so. I wasn't sure what to expect in the letter. It was written in cursive and - like my mother had said - Russian.

Yelena,

You will not understand or remember any of these events by the time you're old enough to read this letter. Please understand that I have brought you here to save your life and give you a brighter future. What's happened to you here has forever altered the course of your life.

You were born to parents who were the designers of and participants in Project МКУльтра, a covert government operation with the goal of developing mind-control techniques which could be used against enemies. The subjects, many of whom have been unwitting, suffering extensive use of psychedelic drugs, physical and mental abuse, sleep deprivation, and malnourishment, among many other experiments. I have been trying to free these patients for years.

Today, my goal has finally become a reality as I free you, my dear. You are the first in a line of children born to these participants and designers. They will stop at nothing to make you one of them. If I do not take you now, you will be subjected to torture in its cruelest form until you are what they want. You have been through enough in your short time here. I cannot let you become what they want. Not a human, but a machine. Your only chance at freedom, to be a child, is to be somewhere far away from here.

You must understand that the United States is the only place you will be safe, far from those who will wish to use or harm you. Be very careful, Yelena. I fear they will one day find you again, no matter how hard I've tried to hide you.

One day, I do hope to see you again. Far from this place and in better faith.

Yours truly,
Vladislav

Mom was right about one thing. The letter did seem to be the ramblings of a madman. It sounded like something out of a movie. "So, I'm Russian, huh?" I asked, unable to fully process my thoughts.

"A very cute Russian," Mom said, trying to lighten the mood. I laughed with her. "You don't have to talk about it now. Not if you're not ready, but we're here when you do want to."

"Do you think there are more people like me?" I asked, flipping my arm over to show my wrist tattoo. The number one tattoo finally made sense. I was the first in a line of experiments and according to Vladislav, I wasn't the only one. "This says I wasn't meant to be the only one."

"I think there are others. I'm hoping they all wound up like you," Mom said, handing me my tea.

"Yelena..." I whispered, testing the name on my tongue. It seemed so foreign. "Was that my given name?"

"We believe so. Your father and I believed that Rachel was a more appropriate name," Mom admitted.

"Yeah, I can see why. It's much more Americanized," I said.

"We didn't want you to be more of an outsider than you already would be."

"What experiments is he talking about?"

That question threw her off. "We were never sure," Mom admitted. I stared at her. There hadn't been any indications as to what had happened to me? "When we adopted you, we ran every test science had to offer to make sure that whoever you came from hadn't hurt you. You have slightly higher than normal brainwave activity, but it didn't bother the doctors. Everything else came back negative.

Honey, you came from a very delusional group of people."

"Who believed in superpowers," I laughed humorlessly.

Judging from the oddities I held, though, maybe they were right. "It's a branch of very unreliable pseudo-science. These people could have killed you trying to prove a theory that held no value," Mom said.

"What about the dreams I've always had?" I asked.

"They're likely nightmares from memories you did retain of your early childhood in Russia."

"You know that I have... abilities."

We stared at each other for a long time. There was no way to deny that I did have abilities that weren't normal. "There may be some truth in the letter," Mom admitted slowly.

"Did you ever try to find this guy?" I asked, motioning to the signature.

"It would have been impossible. Vladislav is a very popular name in Russia," Mom explained. I supposed it was like the surname Brown in the United States. "It may not even be his actual name. He may have been trying to protect his identity. Are you okay?"

"I think I'm even more confused now than I was before," I said.

"Naturally," Mom said, nodding understandingly. "Know one thing, Rachel. No matter where you come from or what abilities you may have, you're our daughter and we love you. We never showed you this letter because we didn't want to scare you."

"Why didn't I scare you?" I asked.

"Children are not their parents. You are not what they did to you. Remember that. You were an innocent child," Mom promised.

The front door opened a moment later and my Dad walked into the kitchen. "Hello, girls," Dad greeted. I didn't turn around to greet

him as my father walked into the kitchen. I heard a sigh escape his mouth when he saw that we were reading the letter. "I wondered when this conversation would happen."

"I'm not angry that you kept the letter from me. I get why you did it," I admitted.

Though I would have rather been shown the letter when I was younger, it made sense why my parents had felt the need to hang onto it. "What are you feeling?" Dad asked kindly.

"Confused," I said honestly.

"I can see why," Dad replied.

"I'm not sure that I'm ready to confront how it makes me feel yet," I mumbled.

"You don't have to. Not now and not ever if you're never ready," Mom insisted. I nodded at her. "If you do want to talk about it, though, just say something."

"Okay. Thanks for being honest," I said.

"Thank you for being understanding. We love you very much, Rachel," Mom replied, running her hand through my hair.

"Come here," Dad said.

Their voices were quieter than I'd heard in a long time. I smiled sadly at my parents as they pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. I held the letter from Vladislav limply from my fingers, unsure of what I should have been feeling. Relieved? Afraid? Angry? Surprisingly enough, I felt a bit numb from the conversation. I had hoped to have answers, but now I only had more questions. I was positive that most of them would never be answered.

For now, I wasn't in the headspace to think about where I had come from. "What do we say we have dinner and forget this? For now, at least," I offered, trying to smile at them.

"If that's what you want," Mom said.

"For now," I confirmed.

"Okay. Why don't you get changed and we'll eat?" Dad nudged gently.

"Okay," I said.

Despite how awkward things were and how jumbled my head was, I refused to get lost in thought. I could think about my childhood and what had happened to me when I'd lived in Russia at a different time. There was no point in thinking about it now. So, I headed upstairs to the shower and stood under the water for nearly half an hour, trying to wash away the thoughts of the day. I didn't want to think of what had happened to me in Russia or the strange situation surrounding Billy's absence from school today.

Once I had climbed out of the shower, I pulled on a thin white tank top, a grey sweatshirt, and a pair of grey track pants. I just wanted to be comfortable tonight. I spread my schoolwork out on my bed and began working on my homework for about half an hour before I was called downstairs to dinner. It was a quiet but peaceful affair. I insisted to my worried parents that I was okay and didn't blame them - I just needed some time to process. They agreed to drop the subject.

The three of us watched Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy together and followed up with a viewing of The Thing. My parents weren't thrilled with horror movies, but I had always liked them. I couldn't help but wonder if some part of me was like the alien from the movie. It made me feel a little sick to my stomach. I made myself another cup of warm tea, trying to pretend that it was what I needed to stay awake. It was just past ten o'clock when I said goodnight to my parents and headed upstairs.

Even though I was exhausted, I didn't go to sleep right away. I stayed up and did some homework for a while instead. I worked until almost midnight when I finally ran out of things to do. I threw my books and notepads into my bag for the morning and pulled off my sweater and track pants so that I could try to get to sleep. Once I had shut the lights off, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and put all of my schoolwork away, I clambered into bed and curled underneath

the covers.

Finding sleep that night wasn't easy. I found myself dreaming of what life may have been like if I hadn't been removed from Russia by Vladislav. I wondered what he was like and who my parents were. I had fleeting nightmares about the torture that I had gone through as a baby. I couldn't figure out if they were real memories or if I might have just been imagining things because of the revelations from the day. I wasn't positive that I ever managed to truly fall asleep.

It must have been the middle of the night when a gentle but annoying tapping sound started on my window. I growled in annoyance as I rolled over. I tried to shove my head under the pillow but the tapping didn't stop. It grew harder and faster. I threw the blankets off myself and walked to the window to see what was making the noise. At first, I didn't see anything. Eventually, I spotted Billy standing in my front yard. His car was nowhere in sight. He had been throwing rocks at my window, which he was now motioning for me to open.

A strange day, indeed... I gently nudged open my window and laughed as I looked down at him. I couldn't make out his figure well from the lack of light. "Hargrove!" I whisper-yelled down to him. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Can I come up?" Billy asked.

My gaze softened. "Yeah."

My first question was why Billy hadn't been in school today. He didn't sound sick and didn't look sick either. Was he just bored with school? He could have at least let me in when I'd come to see him earlier. I stepped back as Billy began climbing the trellis outside of my window. I took a few steps back and pushed the window open wide enough so that he could crawl in. I flicked on my bedside lamp as Billy made it to the windowsill. I crossed my arms irritably as I watched him climb inside.

"Seriously?" I growled once I could see Billy coming up. "You show up here in the middle of the night after you were supposedly out sick all day? You had better have a damn good reason for

showing up here and it better not be because you want to -"

My ranting was interrupted as Billy reached the top of my window and placed one foot on the windowsill. He looked up at me and in the light of the room, I was finally able to see him. I stepped back as Billy climbed into the room. I knew that something was wrong. A deep purple bruise was forming over Billy's right eye and there was a cut on his cheek that looked like it was made from a ring. I could see some bruising and blood on his chest where the neckline of his t-shirt was torn.

Help him, Rachel. You can talk about it later. "Go to the bathroom. It's the second door. I'll be right in," I said quickly.

Billy nodded wordlessly as he followed my directions. He nudged the door closed a bit behind him as I turned around thinking of what I would need. There was a first aid kit downstairs. I gently slipped out of my room and hopped downstairs, skipping the two steps that creaked. My parents wouldn't hear me but I didn't want to risk it. I grabbed the first aid kit from the linen closet and wandered back upstairs. Once I had gotten back to my room, I closed the door behind me and locked it for good measure.

I walked into my bathroom where Billy was waiting for me and closed the door behind me. I placed the first aid kit on the counter and met Billy's eyes. "Take your shirt off and sit over there," I ordered gently.

Billy began unbuttoning the rest of his shirt and followed my directions, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. I took a better look at him as he moved. I could see that there were some bruises in the shapes of human fists over his ribs. There was a nearly black bruise on his right hip. It looked like he had been shoved into something. His back was red and raw from where it looked like he had been thrown against a cabinet. Billy was trying to act like he was fine but I knew that he was in a lot of pain.

Normally, I would have been embarrassed and incredibly turned on by the closeness of the situation and what I was wearing. I was in a tiny pair of grey lace underwear - in a high-waisted thong style - that was easily visible underneath the skin-tight white tank top. It

was the only pair I had that were that small and I hadn't worn them since moving to Indiana. I wasn't wearing a bra either. Billy wasn't hitting on me as he normally would have been doing. He was clearly in both physical and mental pain.

"Turn around. I'll get your back first," I told him quietly.

Billy nodded his confirmation silently. I knew that he couldn't speak right now. The fury was radiating off of him. I kneeled at Billy's back and realized that he had scars I'd never seen before. They weren't deep and could have been mistaken for a biking accident or normal childhood injuries, but I now realized that it wasn't the case. These were clear-cut signs of abuse. Likely from his father, who I had gotten a bad vibe from when we'd first met a few days ago.

I cleaned and washed my hands first and then rinsed and cleaned his numerous abrasions. I ran lukewarm tap water over the wounds for a couple of minutes each, gently removing the bits of what looked like dirt. I then applied a thin layer of antibiotic ointment to each wound to keep the areas moist and prevent infection. Once I was done with that, I then used clean bandages to keep the wound clean, prevent bacteria from infecting the areas, and keep the wound from reopening.

Cleaning Billy's back took at least an hour. I worked in silence, the only noise being Billy's seething breaths. "Turn to face me," I ordered once I was done.

Billy switched spots on the edge of the bathtub. I knew that he would have to rest because of the wounds, but I doubted that he would. I placed two ice packs wrapped in towels over his ribs and right hip and told him to leave them in place for twenty minutes. I mentioned that he would need to repeat that process several times a day for a few days. Once I finished icing the wounds, I compressed the bruised areas to confront the swelling using an elastic bandage I found in the first aid kit.

Billy's chest wasn't bad enough for concern right now. I could come back to those wounds later. Instead, I began working at his black eye. "Do you or did you have any double vision?" I asked.

"No," Billy said.

"Any nose bleeds?"

"No."

"Good. That means that there's likely no skull fracture," I said.

Billy nodded carelessly. I knew that he didn't care how badly he was injured, but I did. I wanted him to be okay. Seeing him right now, like this, broke my heart. The beginning of the night had shown me how much I did care for him. I didn't want him to be hurting and I didn't enjoy seeing how little regard he had for his safety. I knew that this was the wrong time to try and comfort Billy, but I couldn't help it. I leaned up to Billy and wrapped my arms around the back of his neck.

Even if this could comfort him for just a moment, I hoped that it would. I was about to pull away from him when I felt Billy's arm wrap around my back. There was no sleazy or mean gesture behind the action. It was genuine. He needed my comfort as much as I wanted to give it to him. His arms almost hurt me from how tight they were but there was no way that I would ask him to stop. I just let him hug me, kneeling in between his open legs, my fingertips gently running along his upper spine.

After a few moments, I felt Billy tuck his head into my shoulder. His nose was pressed against my throat gently. At first, I believed that he might have been crying but I quickly realized that he was trembling from rage. I gently threaded my fingers through his hair as comfortably as possible. I wanted to calm him down and reassure him that everything would be okay, but I didn't know how. I had dealt with many things before, but I had never dealt with a victim of abuse.

Billy hadn't said it, but I knew that this was from his father. It was easy to tell from the way his father had spoken to him when I'd first seen them together. I gently ran my fingers down his spine as we pulled apart. He met eyes with me as we did. There was no flirtation this time. He wasn't going to say anything sleazy to me this time. This time was all about our feelings - which neither one of us had ever

explored before. I ran my fingers gently down his arm to intertwine our fingers.

The last time we had done this, we had been half-naked and in the heat of the moment. This was nothing that I had ever dealt with before. Billy gently wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me into him, pressing a gentle kiss against my forehead. I smiled, leaning very gently into him to keep any pressure off of his body. As I finally pulled back from him, I placed a hand beneath his right eye. I didn't want to accidentally injure him.

"Can I?" I asked gently, motioning to his black eye.

"Yeah," Billy confirmed.

"Sit down," I said.

Billy sat on the edge of the bathtub again as I leaned in between his legs again. I applied a cold compress using gentle pressure to his upper cheekbone. I didn't press on the eye itself, being very careful to check for blood as I worked. I was glad to see that there was no blood in sight. It meant that there was no severe injury. Once I had held the cold compress against his eye for a few minutes, I changed over to a warm compress, holding that he wouldn't have much swelling.

After a few minutes, I finally got to the last injury. The cut on his cheek was deeper than I had initially believed. Thankfully, it seemed to have stopped bleeding a while ago. I had him apply pressure with a clean cloth for a couple of minutes while I washed my hands thoroughly. I had to make sure I wouldn't cause an infection. I followed through by washing the cut well with soap and water, removing the dirt particles from the area, and letting the water from the faucet run over it for several minutes.

Unfortunately, the wound was deep and had bled a lot. I had to press on the wound firmly for almost ten minutes with a clean cloth. The first cloth became soaked with blood quickly. I had to put a new cloth on top of the old cloth without lifting the first cloth to keep the wound from bleeding even further. Afterward, I applied an antiseptic cream and covered the area with an adhesive bandage. Once I was confident I had fixed his face as much as I could, I turned my

attention to the lesser wounds of his chest.

It was mostly bruising but I knew that they would end up turning ugly colors and become very painful as they began to heal over the next few days. I squeezed out some aloe vera into my hands and started gently rubbing the lotion into his skin. I was hoping it would reduce the pain and swelling at least a little bit. I knew that it must have been uncomfortable having me rub at his wounds. I could see Billy wincing a bit, but I knew that he wasn't going to stop me.

I winced slightly as Billy rested his hands against my thighs and began tightening his grip extremely painfully on me. Billy retracted his arm quickly. "Sorry..." Billy muttered.

"No, please," I said quickly. Billy was still pulling his hands away so I grabbed them and brought them back to my thighs. If this was how he had to get his anger out, I was fine with it. "It's okay. I'm okay, Billy." We looked at each other in the eyes for a long time as I gave him a reassuring nod. "This is okay."

After the day he'd had, I knew that Billy needed to take out his frustration and I was okay with it being on me to some degree. If it meant he dug his fingers into my leg - if that was what it took to calm him down - I was okay with that. Billy stared at me as if searching for some part of me that didn't mean it, before seeming to finally believe me that I was okay with his actions. Billy gently placed his hands on my thighs again and started by putting only a little bit of pressure on me.

It didn't take a genius to know that Billy wanted to take his frustration out on someone. I figured that he would have normally reacted violently to his father's abuse. I noticed that Billy was extremely hesitant to tighten his grip. It took almost a full minute before he began tightening his grip. It was tighter but not painful. I knew that he was still holding himself back. I pressed a little harder on Billy's bruised chest and his grip immediately tightened unconsciously.

I'd known that Billy would do that the moment I'd pressed on him. My leg trembled for a moment from the increased pressure. Billy looked like he was about to pull away from me, but I grabbed his

hand, stopping him from pulling back. Billy stared at me again and I nodded my confirmation. I was okay with this. I would have rather let him get his emotions out than let them bottle up and have him eventually blow up on someone. Billy held me so tightly that I felt like he might snap my femur.

Any nerves that I'd had vanished when Billy leaned forward and rested his forehead against my shoulder. We remained locked like that for a long time, me resting a hand on Billy's knee as he nearly broke my femur from the pressure and tore through my skin with his grip. Eventually, now more stable, Billy leaned back up and nodded that I could continue. I stared at him for a moment before pressing the towel back against his chest and getting back to work.

I worked at Billy's chest in silence for a while before finally deciding that it was okay to speak. "I have a question." Billy tensed slightly. "It's not the one you're thinking. Not yet," I said, giving Billy a soft smile. We would talk about what had led up to this eventually, but not tonight. Billy nodded for me to continue. "Why did you come here? To me? Please don't get me wrong. I'm glad you came here and if this happens again I hope you come back to me, I just don't understand why."

"You're the only person I trusted to see me like this," Billy answered softly.

"I'm glad you came here. This is why you weren't in school?" I asked. Billy nodded. "It'll take a few days for everything to go away but by Monday it should look a lot better."

Billy nodded. "Okay. Will your parents hear us?"

"No. Remember when I mentioned my old nightmares?" I asked. Billy nodded in response. "When I was younger we realized that I wouldn't have as vivid of dreams when I fell asleep listening to music; the caveat was that it had to be loud. My parents started sleeping with earplugs so I could play the music as loud as I needed. I guess they liked not having to hear each other snore or mumble in their sleep anymore because even once I stopped playing the music to get to sleep they kept wearing the earplugs. They won't hear us."

Billy chuckled under his breath. "I'll keep that in mind."

It was good to hear him sounding like himself. I smiled, glad for the joke that he had made, even though it was half-hearted. "I think this is as good as I can do. I'm sorry, I'm not a nurse," I said guiltily.

Billy shook his head. "This is great, Rach. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," I said honestly. "I'm going to clean up. Make yourself comfortable."

Billy nodded as I motioned him out of the bathroom. He walked into my bedroom again so that I could clean up the bathroom. I picked up the bloody cloths to throw them away and wiped up the creams and antiseptics. I put my first aid kit back together and walked past Billy, who was looking at the pictures on my desk and around my mirror, back into the hallway. I headed downstairs and slipped the first aid kit back into the linen closet before heading back to my bedroom and closing the door gently behind me.

Billy was where I had left him before, still staring at the pictures around my mirror frame. "Those are my favorite pictures from my childhood," I said, watching Billy's eyes move around the frame. "That was my home in Florida."

"It looks a little bit like ours in California," Billy commented, looking at the next one.

I smiled at the picture. "That's my best friend from Florida, Casey."

"What's this one?" Billy asked, motioning to a picture in the middle of the frame.

It was one of my favorite pictures; the one that gave me the life I had today. "Oh, that was my adoption ceremony. It happened to be on my third birthday," I explained.

Billy's blue eyes went wide. "You're adopted?" he asked, not bothering to hide the shock.

I blushed slightly. I was going to have to tell him

eventually. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Billy asked.

"Think about it a little bit. When I lived in Florida, everyone knew that I was adopted. My parents had left one evening and returned a few days later with a toddler in tow. They knew that my parents were older and had fertility issues. It was no secret that they were going to adopt a kid. I was raised my whole life with people asking questions that get a little tiring. I don't know who my parents are. I don't know where I'm from. I don't know why they gave me up.

"When we came to Hawkins, I made the conscious choice to not tell anyone that I was adopted. I don't want to deal with the questions or rumors. It's uncomfortable to deal with the stares. If I tell no one, they don't even know anything is amiss. You never thought so. I look enough like my parents that no one questions it. Hell, they are my parents. Anyway, I would rather tell people the truth once I trust them enough and have a private conversation."

The whole story wasn't completely true, but it was mostly accurate. I couldn't tell Billy everything about myself. For the first time since we'd met, Billy almost looked ashamed. "Sorry for asking," Billy muttered.

"It's okay. I would have come up with a lie if I hadn't wanted you to know," I said truthfully.

It was a generic picture that looked like any kind of party. I could have given him an excuse if I hadn't wanted to admit that I was adopted. "Do you want to talk about it?" Billy asked carefully.

"Not tonight," I said.

Too many thoughts were racing through my mind. I was too focused on Billy's predicament. "Okay, we'll circle back to this," Billy teased.

"If we can circle back to what happened tonight," I countered.

Billy smiled as he nodded at me. "Thank you, Rach."

"You're welcome," I said. We smiled at each other before Billy turned away. I realized after a moment that he was heading toward the window; likely to leave. "Wait for a second! Where are you going?"

"I already woke you up in the middle of the night, I'm not going to keep you awake," Billy explained as if it were obvious.

"Are you kidding?" I asked breathlessly. Billy stared at me blankly. I wasn't about to let him go back to his house. Not after whatever had happened between himself and his father. "I'm awake anyway and it'll be worse if you leave. You're not planning on going home, are you?"

Billy shook his head. "Nah. I'll probably head back to our place."

If I hadn't been so thrown off by the events of the night, I would have smiled at his mention of 'our' place. "You don't have to sleep in your car. You're already here. Stay, Billy," I insisted. Billy stared at me for a moment as I moved into him, taking his hands in mine. "Please. It'll make me feel much better."

"You're sure?" Billy asked.

"Positive," I said honestly.

"Okay."

After a moment, Billy and I pulled apart. I watched as Billy grabbed some blankets off of my pile in the corner of my room and started laying them out on the floor. I grabbed Billy's wrist again to stop him. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm making myself a spot," Billy explained.

"On the floor?" I asked. Billy nodded his confirmation. "Don't be stupid. You're not sleeping on the floor. It's a big bed. There's enough room for both of us. Hell, we slept together in the backseat of your car. I think we can share the bed for one night."

"Are you sure you'll be able to resist?" Billy teased.

I laughed. I appreciated the joke, even with the tense air between us. "Are you?" I shot back.

Billy gave me a long once-over. "Not with you wearing those," Billy teased. He was motioning to the tiny thong that was barely covering me. I laughed like an idiot as I threw myself onto the edge of my bed, trying to cover myself up as much as possible. "Don't cover up. What are those?"

My face was burning bright red. "It's a thong. I've never seen people wearing them here but they were popular where I lived back in Florida. I wasn't expecting a visitor tonight," I explained stupidly.

Billy smirked. "Good. You should dress like that more often."

If I dressed like this regularly, there was a good chance that we would never make it out of bed. I swallowed nervously as I laid back against the sheets. "Come on, Romeo," I said, patting the sheets at my side. "We've got school tomorrow."

"Or, we could stay in bed all day," Billy suggested teasingly.

Though I had a feeling he was mostly serious. Billy pulled off his jeans and plopped into bed with me. I started laughing, unsure of what else I was supposed to do. This wasn't how I imagined our first time in bed together to be. I rested against the sheets as Billy joined me. As he met my eyes, I playfully shoved his face away from me. "Go to sleep," I barked.

The two of us made our way up to the pillows so that we could go to sleep. I appreciated that Billy was starting to act a little bit more like himself now that he had calmed down. We remained silent as I shifted underneath the sheets. Billy followed, resting close to me but at a respectful distance. I knew that he was showing me that he wouldn't push things unless I wanted it. I let Billy crawl under the sheets before throwing my comforter over us and flicking off the bedside lamp.

We were immediately plunged into complete darkness. For a few minutes, I wasn't sure what to say or if I should say anything at all. After the days we'd had, maybe we should have just gone to

sleep. Thankfully, Billy was the one to make the first move. I felt his arm land over my head against the pillows. I raised my head slightly so that he could move his arm further down the pillow. I rested my head against his bicep to use it as a makeshift pillow as I rolled over to face him. I smiled at Billy as I tucked my face into his bare chest.

"I knew you liked to cuddle," I teased, my words muffled by his chest.

"Shut up," Billy barked playfully.

The two of us shifted slightly as we relaxed. I wasn't worried about Billy leaving me anymore, no matter what happened between us. I knew for a fact that he thought of me as something much more than a fling. If things weren't so serious, I would have kissed him. Instead, I threw a bare leg over his lap. He was only in his boxers and my small underwear didn't leave much to the imagination. Not that he hadn't seen me mostly naked before. I rested my hand on Billy's bare torso.

My heart began to flutter slightly as Billy turned to face me, pressing a soft kiss against my temple. Billy's spare hand was underneath my body and wrapped to the other side around my waist. I felt his fingers running underneath my tank top to rest in the shallow of my spine. I could feel Billy's heart beating steadily underneath my fingers and I smiled as he tightened his grip on me. He wasn't letting go of me. Not tonight and hopefully not for a long time.

8. Chapter 8

Unlike most mornings, it wasn't my alarm clock chirping away that woke me up. Instead, it was the soft snoring of someone underneath me. It was Billy. I peeled my eyes open slowly and groaned as I stared out the window and into the sun. I had never closed my blinds last night after Billy had climbed in my window. I was almost a little nervous to look at him. I had seen him under the harsh bathroom lights in the middle of the night but I hadn't seen him in the light of day yet. I slowly turned my head to look at him, knowing I had to do it.

It was the most relaxed I had ever seen Billy since meeting him. His face wasn't tense or teasing and his normally well-styled hair was now ruffled all over his head. I could see the cut on his cheek; it was smaller than it was last night and was scabbing over. His bare chest was a few shades darker than it was last night as the bruises were beginning to heal. Billy's arms were around my waist as I slept almost on my stomach against his body. I was turned into his abdomen with one hand resting gently on the non-bruised part of his chest.

Billy and my legs were tangled together with the sheets thrown in a mess around us. I pulled the sheets up around my chest for a moment as I rested against Billy. It was about ten minutes before my alarm was set to go off and I wanted to spend that time with him. This was the side of Billy that I had wanted to see since we had first met. This was the real Billy Hargrove and I knew that I wouldn't ever look at him in the same light after seeing him the way he had been last night.

It had occurred to me in my dreams last night that Billy might have begun pulling away from me. I didn't know how he would react now that he knew I was aware of what was going on in his home. He might have been okay with it, but Billy was a tough guy. He wouldn't want to be gentle around someone. I wanted to wake Billy up and start talking to him about last night, but I didn't want to push it. I knew that he would have to come to me and talk when he was comfortable, not because I was curious.

Not wanting to wake Billy from his peaceful rest, wondering if he

normally got much of a chance to sleep at home, I turned off my alarm clock, pulled myself gently out of his grip, and walked across the room. I stood in the mirror as I started brushing my hair out. I had slight bruising under my eyes from the lack of sleep. I continued pulling my brush through my tangled hair as I began to hear some rustling behind me. Billy was either awake or moving around now that I wasn't pressed against him.

There was some gentle padding on the floor behind me a moment later that told me that Billy was awake. I sighed softly as Billy walked up behind me, still clad only in his boxers. I looked up in the mirror to meet his eyes and stare at his reflection. He looked tired but acutely aware of what was going on. I stood in silence, unsure of what to say to him. I wanted to let him come to me. I dropped the hairbrush on the counter and looked at Billy again. A long silence passed between us as we stared at each other.

Eventually, I knew that I had to be the first one to speak. "Are you okay?" I asked carefully.

The answer was 'no,' but Billy would never have admitted it. Instead, he nodded wordlessly as I stared at his reflection. He didn't speak as he walked up behind me. I sucked in a deep breath as Billy wrapped one hand around my body to hold my opposite hip. His spare hand was placed against my right shoulder and he rested his chin against my left shoulder. I smiled at him, closing my eyes in relaxation at the feeling of his breath on my throat. He may not have wanted to talk about it, but I knew that he was grateful for me.

"Thank you," Billy said quietly.

"Of course," I responded. I turned around in Billy's arms and looped my hands around the back of his neck. We met eyes as I wound my fingers through his long strands of hair. "Will you promise me something?"

"What?" Billy asked.

"You'll come here if this happens again," I offered gently.

Billy laughed humorlessly as he began shaking his head. "When," he

corrected.

The fighting between Billy and his father must have been worse than I had initially thought it was. I swallowed uncomfortably as I nodded my confirmation. "When," I repeated.

"Now will you promise me something?" Billy asked.

"Anything," I said honestly.

"You'll dress like that every time," Billy said.

I laughed under my breath. "I promise. Your turn," I prompted.

"I promise," Billy repeated.

We exchanged a playful smile but the grins quickly became strained. I knew that Billy was uncomfortable being so close to someone. I didn't know exactly how to approach our changing relationship, but I wanted to try something. I wanted Billy to warm up to the idea of being able to talk to me about his relationship with his father. I slowly slid my hand down to Billy's face but he caught my wrist to stop me from going any further. There was an unspoken agreement of what we had to say to each other before pressing forward in our relationship.

"Is this what you wanted?" Billy asked seriously.

My stomach churned with nerves at the sudden turn of the conversation, but I refused to back down. "To know that you're a human being with feelings? Yes, this is what I wanted," I said.

"I'm not easy," Billy replied.

It would have been a lie if I had told him that being with me was easy. We all had our secrets and problems. "Wouldn't want you if you were, Hargrove," I told him, throwing back his words from one of our earlier meetings in his face. Billy smirked at the memory. "You wouldn't have come here if you didn't think I could handle it."

"Can you?" Billy asked teasingly.

"I want to," I answered.

It was easy to tell that being with Billy in any sense was going to be difficult, but I wanted him. Somehow, my words still seemed to surprise him. "No one knows about this," Billy said, referring to the abuse between himself and his father.

"I figured," I said immediately. The last thing I wanted was to push him around about his relationship with his father before he was ready to say anything. "No one will hear about this, Billy. This is your business and it stays between us."

"You're sure this is what you want?" Billy asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Why?" Billy asked.

Was he that insane that he didn't realize that I had feelings for him? It didn't matter that he had a twisted family life. "Last night didn't change the way I feel about you. If anything, it made me see you in a different light. It's not a bad one. You have my word that this doesn't change anything between us," I promised.

"You're sure?" Billy asked.

"We all have secrets," I said honestly, feeling my heart sink into my stomach. "I'm glad you told me this one."

Billy leaned into me slightly. "Last chance."

"I'm not backing away," I said boldly.

We stared at each other for a moment before Billy moved forward to close the tiny gap that we had had between ourselves and pressed his lips roughly against mine. I gasped slightly from the pressure as Billy tightened his grip around my back and lifted me against himself. His hands wrapped into the strands of my hair, tugging the knotted strands back almost painfully hard. The kiss was hot and heavy, just as I had been expecting. Billy wasn't the type to ever go slow, especially not after the night he'd had.

Though I had known that the kiss was coming from a mile away, I was still slightly surprised to feel Billy kissing me. It wasn't a standard first kiss filled with nerves and awkward movements as we attempted to figure each other out; he was kissing me as if he would never get to kiss me again and there was no learning curve. We kissed with teeth over tongues over lips with no intention to ever stop. Billy's hands were wrapped into the fabric of my shirt and I heard the thin material begin to rip under the pressure of his fingers.

My body melted into Billy's as he continued to kiss me, pushing me a few steps backward. My thoughts and worries began fading away as fog took over. I had kissed plenty of guys before and some were very pleasurable, but I had never kissed someone like this before. I'd never kissed someone with the desire to never break the kiss. Billy tightened one hand over my hip and placed his other hand on my thigh, lifting me and throwing me roughly onto the dresser.

Bottles of perfume and tubes of makeup went crashing onto the carpeted floor as Billy reached under my thighs briefly to shove me back against the mirror, his hands wandering up to tear at my hair. I knew that the heated kiss was partially to get out his frustration and partially because we had both been so desperate to this since meeting each other. The payoff was well worth the wait. I ran my fingers down Billy's bare back, my nails biting into his skin. Billy hissed eagerly, yanking my hair again.

Both of us were breathing heavily through the kiss as Billy trailed his hands down my arms and eventually landed behind my knees, pulling me forward and yanking me into him. He wasn't even bothering to hide how much he wanted me - and I refused to hide how much I wanted him. I ran my fingers up Billy's chest to tangle into his sandy blonde hair, keeping him pressed against me. I could feel the rumbling low in his throat as the fabric in my shirt began to tear.

We remained locked together for what felt like hours before Billy lifted me off of the dresser and carried me across the room. My arms were linked over Billy's shoulders but my grip was broken when he dropped me onto the bed. I leaned up from the mattress just long enough to grab him by the back of the neck again and pull him into the sheets with me. Billy hooked one hand around the back of my

right knee and placed the other behind my neck, effectively trapping me against him.

We each explored the other's bodies as our hands worked everywhere around each other. We were both breathing heavily through the kiss as I reached down to undo the knot in the string of Billy's boxers. I was sick of waiting. We had waited for each other long enough. His hands were bruising against my body as Billy's fingers tightened against the lace of my underwear. Billy finally broke the kiss after a few minutes, shoving my face to the side as he began kissing down my throat.

Billy's hands worked underneath my shirt as he began to push it up my torso. I leaned up from the mattress long enough to allow him to pull it over my shoulders and off my body. Billy didn't wait longer than half a second after removing the shirt from my body before tossing me back into the sheets. His mouth was trailing down my body in open-mouthed kisses as I wrapped my legs tightly around his waist. I reached to his waist again and continued yanking at the strings on his boxers.

No sooner had I loosened the knot than a voice startled us out of our lust-filled haze. "Rachel!" Mom yelled from directly underneath us. "Are you awake yet?"

Both Billy and I jumped so badly that we nearly knocked heads. Even though I had locked my bedroom door last night out of precaution, I pulled the blankets over myself out of instinct. "Yeah, Mom!" I yelled back, trying not to sound too breathless. "I've been up for a while."

Billy was breathing heavily in my face, resting over me. "Maybe I should go say good morning," he teased.

"You want me to kill you?" I snapped.

"Do you want breakfast?" Mom yelled up.

"Sure," I called back.

"Bacon and eggs or pancakes?"

"Oh, pancakes sound good," Billy said happily.

"Shut up," I muttered in response. "Pancakes, please!"

"Come downstairs!" Mom ordered.

"Be there in a few minutes," I responded.

It was too bad that it was a school day, which meant that Billy and I weren't going to get the chance to continue exploring each other. I smiled bashfully at Billy as I leaned up against the mattress, keeping my sheets wrapped around my waist. "You're going to hide now?" Billy asked bemusedly.

As if he had challenged my pride, I dropped the sheet from my form. "I'm not hiding," I said honestly.

The moment I began leaning forward, I raised onto my knees so that I could straddle Billy's waist and push him back against the sheets. This time he didn't fight me and instead went along with my actions. I leaned down to meet Billy's lips and smiled at the giddy feeling I was getting from him as we shared a slow and lazy kiss - very much unlike the one we'd just broken. Billy was running his hands along my bare back and through my hair gently. Long minutes passed before I convinced myself to pull away from him.

"But you do have to go," I told Billy.

"We can't stay in bed all day?" Billy groaned.

"We have school," I pointed out.

Billy huffed under his breath. "What fun is school? I'm much more entertaining."

As much fun as it would have been to roll around in bed with Billy all day, there was no way I could skip classes. "I agree, but I also have a calculus test today," I told him.

Billy pressed his nose into my throat. I moaned deeply and smirked as I felt Billy tense against me. "Blow it off," he groaned.

As much as I would have loved to blow off a very annoying calculus test to roll around with Billy, my GPA and parents wouldn't

appreciate it. My head seemed to be filled with a thick haze as Billy leaned up, pressing his lips against mine in a somewhat sweet and slow kiss. Billy's demeanor shifted to one a little bit gentler than before as one of his hands slid down my spine to rest against my rear, pulling me into his lap. I breathed out through the kiss, running my fingers through his soft hair.

It was a few minutes before Billy broke the kiss. "You proved it, Rach."

"Proved what?" I asked dumbly. Billy pulled back to stare at me and I began laughing almost immediately as I remembered that I had told him not long ago that I had once started hooking up with guys to prove nasty (and untrue) rumors about me being bad in bed wrong. "You haven't seen anything yet, Hargrove."

Billy smirked. "Show me."

We stared at each other for a few moments before I decided to go for it. I took my flat palms and shoved Billy back against the bed. He hit the pillows with a grunt as I climbed over his lap, kissing the top of his chest. I could feel Billy's body tense as I kissed my way down his chest and torso. I hooked my fingers into the waistband on his boxers as I moved downward and had them lowered down around the 'V' at his waist, tracing my tongue along it, before my voice called up to me again.

"Rachel!" Mom shouted again. I twitched in surprise and backed a few inches away from Billy, who groaned irritably underneath me. "Come downstairs. What the hell are you doing?"

"Me," Billy growled.

I laughed quietly. "Just trying to find my outfit," I yelled downstairs.

"I like you better without anything on," Billy commented.

Fearing that there was a chance Mom or Dad might hear him, I slapped my hand over his mouth to keep him from speaking anymore. "I'll be down in a minute!" I shouted before turning back to look at Billy regretfully. "I think that's my cue."

Billy nodded. "All right." He leaned up to press a gentle kiss against my mouth. "I'll get ready to go."

We exchanged another small and gentle kiss before I hopped off of Billy's lap so that I could start getting ready for the day. I was already incredibly late and every moment we were together, I was making it worse. I realized that, as I began getting ready, Billy was still laying in bed, just watching me get ready. I smiled at his reflection in the mirror as I started walking around the room. Billy laid back in the sheets, taking my stuffed tiger and holding it in the air, laughing at it.

"Give Tigger back," I demanded irritably.

A massive grin turned upward on Billy's mouth. I felt my cheeks burn with annoyance and embarrassment. "Tigger?" Billy repeated bemusedly, turning the bear over in his hands. "That's adorable, Rach."

"Shut up," I growled awkwardly. "He was the only thing I came to the orphanage I was adopted with."

Billy's head snapped up so that he could meet my eyes. Pity and guilt flooded them as he placed Tigger gently back on the sheets; it was gentler than I would have expected. "Sorry," Billy mumbled.

"It's okay, you didn't know," I told him honestly. It was no big deal and I was impressed that he had been so kind about my silly stuffed animal. "Don't feel bad for me. I ended up with a pretty good life."

Billy nodded blankly. "Yeah."

It had occurred to me since realizing what his home life was like last night, that even though my life had started a lot rougher than his had, I had ended up with a much better childhood than he had. My parents loved me. His parents were either careless or abusive. I shook my head clear of my thoughts as I pulled on a beige bra and a pair of ripped-up jeans. I was still looking for a shirt that I could wear when Billy walked up behind me; he had pulled his jeans on and he was holding his torn shirt between his fingers.

"Thank you for last night," Billy said quietly.

"Of course," I replied.

Billy placed a hand underneath my chin and tilted it up gently so that he could press a kiss against my mouth. "And for this morning," he added.

"My pleasure," I teased gently. I pushed myself gently up onto my toes so that I could reach around Billy's neck and pull him in for another kiss. "There's more where that came from, Hargrove."

Billy grinned. "I look forward to it, Winters. I'll see you at school."

"Can I count on you to come today?" I asked playfully.

A small chuckle escaped Billy's throat as he walked to my window, threw his legs through the opening, and turned back to look at me. "If you're going to be there? Absolutely," Billy teased. I smiled at his almost annoying confidence. "By the way, did how much time did you spend going over all my schoolwork?"

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. Billy already knew I cared for him; I didn't need to make it more obvious. "Oh, I got to school a little early and started working. It wasn't that big of a deal," I said carelessly.

Billy nodded. "Sure."

The sound of his voice told me what I already knew. We exchanged a knowing smile as I glanced at the floor. We both knew that what I had done for him yesterday was a romantic notion but neither one of us could bring ourselves to say it out loud. We weren't there yet. Billy leaned forward and tilted my head up so that our lips could meet in a final kiss. "Bye, Billy," I whispered as we pulled apart.

"See you later, Rach," Billy replied.

With one final smile tossed back at me, Billy threw himself gently out of my window and started climbing down the trellis. I crossed my room a moment after he had vanished from view and closed my window, throwing my curtains closed afterward to make sure that my parents wouldn't suspect anything that had happened last night if they wandered into my room today. I leaned over to grab my shirt off

of the floor, tossing it over my shoulders, and fluffing my hair before heading downstairs.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked the moment I hit the landing. My tongue seemed to lodge itself in my throat as I came up with a good answer. "I don't think I've ever seen you take that long in the morning."

"Yeah, I just couldn't find any of my stuff," I answered vaguely.

"Are you sure?" Mom asked disbelievingly. "You're flushed."

"I had a weird dream last night. It's no big deal," I said, desperate to wave off her concern.

If Mom somehow found out what had happened in my bedroom a few minutes ago, I would have never heard the end of it. "If you say so. Here are your pancakes," Mom said.

"Thanks," I replied.

Once I took the plate from Mom, I walked over to the kitchen table to dig into my pancakes. A few minutes after we had both sat down to eat, we were joined by my father, who greeted us and went about reading his paper. We ended up having a very normal breakfast together, talking and laughing as we watched the weather and morning news. As much as I tried to focus on my parents, my mind kept coming back around to Billy and our encounters both last night and this morning.

As I curled up in my kitchen chair, I felt the tenseness in my legs and the strain in both my arms and waist. It was from the way that Billy had held and grabbed at me earlier. I tugged the waistband of my jeans up a little bit higher when I realized that my waist was bruised from the way he had been touching me. I was positive that my arms and legs were both littered with bruises as well. As I shifted my clothes, I wondered what Billy was thinking and if he was going home or heading straight to school.

Desperate to think about something else, I started a quiet conversation with my parents as the television continued to drone on about the news. I laughed with my parents as I shifted around in my

chair. I hadn't been this excited to go to school in months. I just hoped that no one would notice my excitement as I hadn't exactly been thrilled to go to school since starting at Hawkins High. It was just because Billy had made going to school far more interesting and now I couldn't wait to see him today.

As the three of us chatted back and forth among ourselves, I picked limply at my pancakes. I tried to convince my parents that I was fine from the revelations of my early childhood last night - which was mostly true - and that I was just eager for the weekend - which was also true. I smiled as my parents chit-chatted happily, but my focus was firmly locked on my encounters with Billy last night and this morning. I was so curious about our relationship that I couldn't wait to find out what we were, or what we were becoming.

After about twenty minutes of mindless chatter, I rose from the table and took my plates with me. "Okay, I'm going to head out. I'll see you two this afternoon," I called back to my parents.

"Have a good day at school, dear," Dad called back.

"Thanks, Dad. Love you!" I shouted.

"Love you, too!" he replied.

We smiled at each other and I pressed a kiss against my father's cheek. As I released him, I turned around and walked into the kitchen. I washed off my plate and threw my coffee mug in the sink before turning back toward the foyer. I stood in front of the floor-length mirror, fixing my hair and clothes before I left. I pulled the collar of my shirt up a little higher, realizing that there were some red marks from Billy. I could see them on my waist too; I smirked at the sight. I knew that Billy would be pleased that I wasn't hiding them.

As I twirled my hair around my fingers mindlessly, Mom walked up behind me. "How are you feeling today?" she asked.

"Really good," I answered.

"Really good?" Mom repeated, a bemused smile gracing her lips.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that she knew something was going on. I smirked at her as I sipped my water from my cup. "I think I've finally made some serious progress with Billy," I told her vaguely.

It would be even better if I got the chance to figure out what we were to each other. "Is that so?" Mom asked, grinning. I hummed my confirmation. "In that case..." I raised my eyebrows curiously as Mom leaned forward to unbutton the highest button that I'd had closed on my shirt. She lowered her voice as she leaned into my ear. "A little lower on the neckline."

We both laughed as Mom wrapped her arms around my waist and kissed the crown of my head. "You being a bad influence is always appreciated," I joked.

"Tell Billy I said he's welcome," Mom teased.

I laughed again. "I will."

After a brief moment of silence, we smiled at each other again and I hugged Mom before turning back to grab my things. Once I had my keys, backpack, and sunglasses, I headed outside. I unlocked my car and started throwing my things inside, my mind consumed with thoughts of what Billy was thinking. I wished I had thought to get into his head before he had left, but he also deserved some privacy. It simply drove me insane thinking that I would have to be patient with the person I was the most eager to get to know.

A horn blared behind me and I turned to see that it was Billy with Max in his Camaro. So much for having to be patient. Billy roared up to my driveway and smirked as he rolled down his window. "Get in," Billy told me.

Max watched curiously as I stalked up to the driver's door of the Camaro, leaning into the open window. "Didn't we just say goodbye literally half an hour ago?" I asked quietly.

"What's your point?" Billy asked.

We stared at each other for a moment before my lips split in a smile. "I don't have one," I admitted.

Billy grinned as he repeated, "Get in."

"Hang on," I told him.

Billy nodded and waited patiently as I crossed my driveway back to my car. I took my things out of the passenger seat and closed the door as I locked the door behind me, heading back toward Billy's car. He smirked as I hopped into the passenger seat that had recently been vacated by Max. "Nice shirt," Billy teased as he looked at my shirt.

I'd decided to wear the shirt that I had taken from Billy after our near-hookup during Tommy's party. His shirt that I was wearing now only had two buttons done up and it was tied around my waist to hold it in place. "Thanks. It was just something I had laying around," I said carelessly, turning toward the backseat. "Hey, Max."

"Hi, Rach," Max greeted happily.

Billy arched an eyebrow at the nickname as I turned back to sit normally. "But she doesn't get yelled at for it?" Billy asked irritably.

"No," I said blankly.

"Why not?" Billy huffed.

"Because she's cool. You suck," I told him. Billy leaned over to whack me on the arm. "Ow!"

"I'll make you walk," Billy warned.

"No, you won't," I countered.

"Want to bet?" Billy dared.

"Sure," I agreed. If we were going to make a bet, there was no way I was going to lose. I rested my hand gently on Billy's knee and slowly began to worm my way up his leg. "What do I get if I win?"

"Me," Billy answered.

"I'll take that bet," I told him. We smiled at each other as I looked

back at Max. I didn't want her to potentially overhear me blatantly flirting with her stepbrother. "How are fractions going?"

Max shook her head. "I don't get them."

Fractions weren't easy and most kids struggled with them. "Is that what you're doing?" I asked Max, motioning to the notebook that was laying open in her lap. The younger girl had been scowling at the notebook since I had jumped in the car. "Hand it over."

"We're multiplying fractions," Max explained, handing me the notebook.

"Ah, I can do that," I explained. "May I?"

Max nodded and laughed as I slipped out of the passenger seat and hopped into the back with Max. The two of us spread out our paperwork as I tossed my hair back into a messy bun. I spotted Billy looking at me in the mirror and I winked at him as I went back to the schoolwork. Max and I spent the few minutes of the ride to school talking and going over multiplication with fractions before we eventually arrived at school. As Billy pulled into the school, I tossed everything back into my bag and hopped out of the car.

Max threw down her skateboard as I crossed to the front of the car and joined Billy. Billy threw an arm over my shoulder as we said goodbye to Max and headed toward the school. I could see the usual glares being thrown my way by the girls in school. It made me roll my eyes. If only they had seen us this morning; I just wasn't sure how far Billy would be willing to go with me in public. I didn't even know what last night had meant to him, but I was determined to find out. I nudged Billy's shoulder playfully as we walked.

"Not that I don't appreciate the stalking, but when are you going to ask me on a real date?" I teased.

Billy smirked. "What are you doing tonight?"

"You tell me," I said vaguely.

"Be ready at eight," Billy replied.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

My outfit was going to be dependent on what we were doing. Billy smirked at me again, purposely ignoring my question as he released my shoulder. "I'll pick you up at eight," Billy said.

"Well, what am I supposed to wear?" I asked.

"Nothing works," Billy suggested.

I started laughing as I shook my head. "Hargrove!" I barked after him as he walked off.

"I'll see you at eight!" Billy yelled back.

That was pretty much useless. Billy looked over his shoulder and sent me a small wink before turning away and heading toward the main building. I rolled my eyes at his antics with a fond smile on my face as I stared after him. "What's that dumb smile for?" Nancy asked, appearing at my side suddenly.

"I've got a date with Billy tonight," I chirped.

Nancy's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Yeah. A real date, Nance," I said excitedly.

"How did this develop in the few minutes you two were together this morning?" Nancy asked curiously.

My cheeks burned slightly as I grabbed Nancy's arm and pulled her out of the courtyard with me. "Uh... We didn't just see each other this morning. He spent the night last night," I admitted.

Nancy's eyes went as wide as the saucer plates we had at home. "What?" Nancy gasped.

"It's not what it sounds like!" I replied immediately. Although I would have loved to go all the way with him last night or this morning, I knew that it wasn't the right time. "We didn't sleep together. He came over late last night and we just... talked. I invited him to stay once it had gotten late."

There was no way that I could or would tell Nancy about what was going on with Billy at his house. I would have to make up a lie. "That seems oddly innocent but I like it," Nancy joked. I smiled at her. "I didn't expect it."

"Well, we kissed this morning," I admitted.

Nancy smiled fondly. "It's getting better!"

I laughed awkwardly as I continued, "It may not have been a completely innocent kiss."

That was perhaps the nicest way I could have described our date this morning. Nancy laughed, smacking me good-naturedly on my shoulder. "Good! You two have been dancing around your feelings for each other from the day you met," she pointed out. I nodded my agreement. "You two deserve to go on a real date and see if your relationship could be more."

It was a strange thought to have; what could Billy and I become? "I think it might," I said.

Nancy nodded, smiling. "What are you two doing?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. He won't tell me," I huffed irritably.

Nancy's eyes widened as she smiled at me. "Wow. Maybe Billy Hargrove is capable of some kind of romance."

There was no way that he was capable of romance. I refused to believe that considering the conversations we'd had since our first meeting. "Yeah, right," I huffed, a little annoyed at the thought. "It's been a long time since I've been this excited for a date."

"You'll tell me everything in the morning, right?" Nancy asked excitedly.

"I'll be over first thing," I said truthfully. Nancy was the only person in Hawkins I was comfortable enough with to have girl-talk and I was going to take full advantage of it. We both giggled at her eagerness. "Come over after school today to help me pick out an outfit?"

"Of course!" Nancy chirped as the bell for our first period began to ring. "I'll see you at lunch."

"See you then," I replied.

As we both headed to our respective classes, I let the fog take over my brain. I didn't pay a lick of attention during any of my classes. I knew what we were studying as I tended to get ahead of my work. Instead, I began thinking about the date that I would be having with Billy tonight. I was curious about what we were going to do. It felt like hardly five minutes had passed before the bell began to ring for lunch. I practically threw myself through the lunchroom doors so I could talk to Nancy about my ideas for date outfits.

As I got in line for my lunch, I walked up with Mark, who I had run into in the hallway. I was standing in the lunch line with him, chatting about his next football game that was slated for next Friday. I was about to grab a bread roll when Tina reached for the same roll from the other side of the line. I grabbed the bread from underneath her as Tina shrank back. She had been a lot quieter and had mostly avoided me since our blowup the prior day. I noticed that Billy was standing two people behind Tina in line with Tommy between them.

"Hey, Rachel," Tommy greeted, never one to miss an opportunity to poke at a tense or awkward situation. I broke eye contact with Tina to glare at Tommy. "Planning on giving us another show today?"

Billy quirked an eyebrow at me from across the line. "I don't know," I growled at Tommy, looking back at Tina. "Have anything to say to me, Tina?"

"You're lucky that I didn't report you," Tina snarled.

"For what?" I asked facetiously. There was nothing she could have reported me for. I would have happily walked away yesterday. "You reached out to grab my hair first. I didn't start that fight, I just ended it."

Mark gently rested his hands against my back, starting to nudge me along. "Leave it," Mark said, lowering his voice so that I was the only one who could hear him. "She's not worth it."

"I'm going to break her nose," I muttered.

Mark tightened his grip on my waist warningly, pulling me along with him. He didn't want me anywhere near Tina, which was probably a good idea. "I know you will, and you'll get yourself expelled in the process. Come on, leave her alone," Mark warned.

"Fine," I mumbled.

We didn't get more than three steps from the lunch line when I heard Tina speak again. "You're not that intimidating, Rachel," Tina called. I whipped around to scowl at her. "You like to think you are and you've fooled Billy into believing that, but it's an act and anyone with eyes can see it. Billy will see it soon enough."

Tina and I glared at each other as I tossed my plate down on the table with Steve and Nancy, who were both looking at me like I had lost my mind. "In case I didn't make myself clear yesterday..." I told Tina, trailing off.

Thankfully, Billy hadn't been standing far away from us. I wasn't sure how he would feel about what I was about to do, but I didn't care. I crossed the cafeteria and grabbed Billy by the lapels of his jacket, yanking him into me. Billy grunted as I pressed a rough kiss against his mouth for everyone else to see. Billy seemed surprised but he laughed into the kiss as he lowered his hands to grab at my ass. There were loud gasps from the students and immediate chatter as I broke the kiss, smirking at him.

Once I was satisfied that I had made enough of an impression, I turned back to Tina, who was staring open-mouthed at us. "It's like I told you yesterday - he's not interested," I called to her.

A few beats passed before Tina whipped around and stormed away from us. Mark snorted under his breath at my antics, winking playfully at me before turning away to sit with the rest of his snickering football friends. "What did I miss yesterday?" Billy asked curiously.

"I'll tell you later," I said through my laughter.

Billy grinned eagerly. "Well, since everyone knows now."

Billy reached out to take my hand as he began pulling me along with him. "Like you would have hidden it that long anyway," I chuckled.

"Nah," Billy confirmed.

We smiled at each other as Billy wrapped his hand up around my wrist and started dragging me along with him. We wandered down the school halls for a few moments until we came to an opening that led to one of the supply closets. Billy shoved me down the hallway and I nearly tripped over myself until he pushed me up against the wall and captured my mouth in a rough kiss. Any hunger that I'd had for my lunch vanished as it was replaced with a hunger for Billy.

Billy ran his hands up my bare stomach and settled them underneath the hem of the shirt that I was wearing. My mouth split into a grin as I wrapped my fingers into his belt loops and yanked him into me. We were going to get into a ton of trouble if we were caught, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I ran my hands up into his hair and tangled my fingers in his long locks. Billy took the ends of my long hair and bunched them up against the lower part of my skull.

The tips of Billy's fingers ran down my spine and reached into my waistband, pulling me into him. I laughed into the kiss as I ran my hands underneath his shirt to rest against his bare chest. Billy's tongue chased mine around my mouth as we kissed, the rough textures on the wall scratching into my back and leaving what I was sure were going to be bright red marks. I eventually took the lead and shoved Billy backward so that his back was now pressed into the wall. He grunted from the pressure but his lips turned up in a smile.

After laughing for a few moments, and exchanging a longing kiss, the bell rang to signal the end of the lunch hour. I pressed a small kiss against Billy's mouth as my way of saying goodbye. "Leave with me," Billy muttered against my lips.

"I've still classes to get to and you've got to bring your sister home at the end of the day," I reasoned.

"She can skate home," Billy replied.

No way was I letting Billy force Max into having to skate back to their house. "Mm-mm..." I disagreed, pressing a long kiss against Billy's mouth and speaking through it. "You can wait for our date."

"Come on, Rach!" Billy groaned, pulling back from me.

"Get to class, Hargrove," I snapped.

As much as I would have loved to leave with him, I knew that I had to be the responsible one. Billy rolled his eyes as I winked playfully at him, shifted my clothes back into place, and walked back toward my next class. On my way out, Nancy and Steve were quick to corner me. Nancy laughed as I smoothed my hair out in a way-too-obvious manner. "I thought you just said you had a date with Billy," Nancy joked.

"I do, tonight at eight," I told her.

"That's what you do before the date?" Steve asked disbelievingly.

Steve may have remade himself since starting to date Nancy, but that didn't mean that he wasn't a player a few months ago. "Okay, grandpa, how about we talk to some of your exes?" I snapped.

Steve flushed. "Point taken."

"You realize that you're both going to get detention if someone sees you next time," Nancy pointed out.

"Yeah, but it'll be so worth it," I joked.

Even though Nancy smiled, Steve didn't look any more convinced that I should have been going out with Billy. "You're going out with him?" Steve groaned.

"Who else should I go out with? Someone like Tommy?" I suggested.

It wasn't like my date with Mark had gone well. I wasn't interested in anyone like him and most guys at Hawkins High School were exactly like him. I needed someone different. "Hargrove is exactly like Tommy!" Steve barked.

If only Steve had been able to see Billy when he had visited me last night. "He is not! Come on, guys. Try to be a little supportive," I begged them. I was certain that most people weren't going to be. I needed my friends at my side. "I know that Billy's got an edge and doesn't get along with most people, but I've seen other sides to him. He's not the kind of person he seems like he is."

Nancy looked a little guilty over the way she had been speaking about Billy, but Steve still didn't look moved. "Weren't you the same way, Steve?" Nancy asked her boyfriend.

Steve flushed again. "Yeah, I guess," he admitted.

"Tell me to have a good time tonight," I ordered him.

"Have a good time..." Steve said begrudgingly.

"That sounded so sincere," I growled.

"I'll see you before you leave for the date," Nancy said. All three of us started heading toward our respective classes when Nancy turned back. "Wear that cute red skirt!"

It was one of my more recent purchases from the thrift store that had become one of my favorite places to go with Nancy. "Oh, that's a good idea!" I yelled.

"That thing is a napkin!" Steve barked.

"That's the point!" I called back over my shoulder.

To keep Steve from yelling at me even more, Nancy began tugging him along with her as we both laughed. The remainder of the school day passed in a bit of a blur, but I did hear most students talking about my relationship with Billy. The girls scowled at me as I passed and the boys chuckled, thinking that my going out with Billy meant that I was an easy target. The teachers were barely able to get a word in edgewise between the many conversations about our relationship. They only grew even louder when the final bell rang and I walked out to Billy's car.

Billy was already standing there and waiting. I smiled at him as he

wrapped an arm around my shoulder. The two of us hung out at his car as we waited for Max to arrive. Billy seemed a lot less tense than he normally would have been having to wait for his stepsister. I couldn't help but wonder if it was because I was with him. Most of the time we stood there, I was wondering how much he was into me when it meant more than my body. We shared a cigarette as I sat on the hood of his car with him in between my legs.

Billy snatched my cigarette from my hands and began smoking it himself. "Hey, get your own!" I snapped.

"I'd much rather have you," Billy said.

The argument died on my tongue as Billy pulled me against him. Our lips met in a kiss as Billy rested his hands on my thighs. Not caring that every student in the parking lot was watching us, I threw my arms over Billy's shoulders as we kissed. We remained locked together even as mutters and whispers followed us. Billy and I only broke apart when we heard a small chuckle in the background. I broke away from Billy to smile awkwardly at Max, who was watching us with a vague grin.

"Hey, Max," I greeted.

"Hi, Rachel," Max said happily.

We smiled at each other again as I sent Billy's stepsister a friendly wink. Max was right. Billy did like me more than I had realized and so far it seemed that he did want to be with me. Billy hopped into the driver's seat and sped out of the parking lot with 'I Was Made For Lovin' You' by Kiss blaring over the radio. Billy's hand rested on my thigh as we drove down the road; he sent me teasing grins as we drove. The windows were down and I rested back against the headrest with my eyes closed. I loved the feeling of being on open roads.

It was a few minutes later that we pulled up to my house. "I'll get you at eight," Billy told me.

"Sounds good. See you then," I said. Billy squeezed my thigh as I hopped out of the car. "See you later, Max!"

"Bye, Rach!" Max yelled back. "Have fun tonight."

"Thanks." I closed the door behind me and turned back to my house. There was someone I needed to bother. I headed up the driveway and walked through the front door, closing it behind me. "Hey, Mom!" I shouted into the empty foyer.

"Hi, honey!" Mom greeted, poking her head out from the kitchen. "How was school?"

"Eh, you know, it was school. Come upstairs with me!" I goaded.

"What?" Mom asked.

"I've got a date with Billy tonight and I need a second opinion on my outfit," I said.

"So that was what you meant by progress," Mom teased.

"Yeah! Come on, help me out," I said.

At least Mom was willing to play my games. She and I started digging through my closet and dumping out my clothes so that we could figure out what I would wear. I eventually settled on the tight red skirt Nancy had mentioned earlier. It was high-waisted and skintight with silver clips running down the sides. I took a low-cut white spaghetti strap shirt and threw an acid-washed denim jacket over my shoulders as it was cold out. Mom helped me curl my hair and I threw on some light makeup to even out my skin tone and make my eyes pop.

Almost thirty minutes later, there was a gentle knock at the door. A moment later, Nancy appeared in my room. "You look beautiful," she said, giving me a once-over. "Billy will love it."

"Yeah?" I asked, irritatingly nervous about our date.

Nancy nodded her confirmation. "Very lovely, Rachel," Mom said, running her fingers through my hair. "Billy's one lucky guy."

"Yeah, he is and he damn well better know it," I said, smoothing out the wrinkle I noticed in my skirt.

All three of us laughed. "Can we offer you dinner, Nancy?" Mom said.

Nancy nodded. "Sure. Thank you, Mrs. Winters."

The three of us headed downstairs to eat the dinner that my mother had left out for me once I'd gotten home. I chatted with my parents and Nancy as my father shook his head chidingly at my outfit. He still wasn't fond of my clothes. Nancy and my mother both stepped in for my defense to argue that it was a cute outfit and worth wearing. Dad rolled his eyes and went back to the news, telling me that he didn't want to hear anything about the date other than the news that Billy kept his hands to himself. We all laughed.

Nearly two hours after Mom, Nancy, and I had started finding a date outfit for me, Nancy stood from the dinner table. She was glancing at her wristwatch. "I've got to go home and finish my homework," Nancy said. We nodded at her as she pushed in her chair behind her. "Have a good date! Tell me all about it in the morning."

"Absolutely. Come over first thing," I told her.

"Good luck," Nancy whispered.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

Nancy and I exchanged a quick hug as she turned to leave. The two of us exchanged a knowing grin as she walked off. We both knew the kind of gossip that she was looking forward to hearing. Once Nancy had left, I smiled at my parents as the three of us stood from the table and went to our evening routines. Mom was standing at the sink as she did the dishes. I crossed the dining room to walk into the living room and toss myself on the couch with Dad to watch the news for a bit before my date.

All I needed was to watch some mindless television. I was trying to settle my racing thoughts. Right now, my mind was firmly locked on thinking about Billy. I both wanted and needed to try and calm down before Billy arrived. I tried to get lost in announcements about the weather and sports, but I was far too entertained with the thoughts of my upcoming date. I wanted to know what we were going to do and how he would act on an actual date. Instead, I kept watching the

clock.

At just a minute past eight o'clock, I was surprised to hear a knock at the front door. "A knock. That's proper," Mom joked.

"And surprising," I mumbled, jumping up from the couch to walk into the foyer. I stood in front of the mirror to check my hair and makeup for a brief moment before turning to the door and throwing it open. I smiled at Billy, who was standing on the door stoop. "Hi."

Billy grinned back at me. "You look beautiful."

My cheeks warmed slightly. "Thank you." I noticed that Billy's eyes were trailing up and down my body. I looked him over and smiled. He was wearing a pair of tight light-washed jeans and a nice black shirt that was unbuttoned well down his torso. His curly hair was brushed back behind his ears and he was wearing cologne that smelled wonderful. "You're not so bad yourself," I commented, trying to wet my lips that had suddenly gone dry.

Billy grinned, his dark eyes slowly peeling themselves off of me. He glanced at my parents, who had both walked up to stand behind me. "Mr. Winters. Mrs. Winters," Billy greeted politely.

They both smiled - Dad's looked a little bit more strained than Mom's did - as I stepped aside and allowed them to pass. Billy shook both of my parents' hands. "Nice to finally meet you, Billy," Dad said. Billy nodded his agreement. I walked onto the front door stoop as Billy wrapped an arm respectfully around my waist. I noticed Dad's eyes follow Billy's hands. "Have a good night, kids."

"We will," I called back.

It felt like Billy was going to hesitate and continue speaking to my parents, but I grabbed his hand and started pulling him along. "Home by twelve. Bonus points for eleven forty-five," Mom called after us.

"Got it!" I yelled back. Billy and I turned back to my parents long enough to send them a small wave. They closed the door behind us as Billy and I headed to his car. He opened the passenger door for me and I smiled. "And he's a gentleman to boot."

"I told you I know how to treat a woman," Billy said.

It seemed that Billy only knew how to treat a woman well when he wanted to do it. He closed the car door behind me and crossed in front of the car to climb into the driver's side, starting the engine. "Want to tell me what we're doing now?" I asked eagerly.

Billy glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes as he rested a hand on my thigh. "You don't leave much to the imagination, do you?"

"No, I don't. Please tell me what we're doing."

"No," Billy said firmly. "Just sit there and look pretty."

The look in his eyes was enough to tell me that there was no way he was going to tell me what we were doing. I figured that this time I would let myself be surprised. "Alright, I can do that," I told him.

We both sat back in our chairs as we chattered away mindlessly. Billy teased me for the schoolwork that I had done for him while he was out of school. I rolled my eyes and insisted that it wasn't that big of a deal. I didn't know how to get him to drop the topic, so instead, I started messing with him. I ran my hands up and down Billy's thighs, smirking as I saw his leg muscles tensing under my touch. Billy squeezed my knee tightly to make me release my grip on him.

About five minutes after we had left my house, Billy slowed down and pulled into a dirt drive. "Here we are," he announced.

There wasn't a building or parking lot insight. I glanced out the window and smiled when I realized that he had pulled into a clearing in the woods that had a perfect view up at the stars. It wasn't a typical first date for Hawkins, but I thought it was beautiful. "Here I thought we were heading to the movies or dinner," I teased.

Billy shook his head. "Nah. Those are too boring."

From what I had heard about Billy's dates, he had either brought them straight home with little chatter or taken them to a movie - where they rarely watched the movie. I had never heard of Billy bringing someone to the woods. It could have been taken as Billy wanting to hook up somewhere private (which I was positive was

part of it) but I had a feeling it was more than that. He had brought me out here because it was a chance for us to talk without being interrupted.

Talking wasn't something I would have thought Billy would want on a date. "But you didn't bring me home?" I asked him.

We smiled at each other as we both threw our doors open and climbed out of the car. "Nah. You're better than that," Billy said, motioning me to follow him to the trunk.

"Damn right, Hargrove. Don't you forget it," I teased, jamming a finger into his sternum.

"I doubt you'd let me," Billy replied.

"Never," I confirmed. We smirked at each other as Billy walked up to the trunk and popped it open. I raised an eyebrow and watched as Billy pulled out a small checkered blanket and a bowl of snacks like chips and cookies. Okay, not what I was expecting. "A moonlit picnic?"

"You said you liked the outdoors. I figured this was a good place to start," Billy said carelessly.

The tone of his voice told me that he was determined to play off the romantic gesture as something that should have been obvious. "Would you look at that?" I teased, nudging Billy's shoulder. "Billy Hargrove has a romantic side."

Though that wasn't something he would easily admit. We stared at each other for a moment and I smirked as Billy glared at me. A few seconds passed before Billy smiled and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. We both chuckled as he grabbed the baster and blanket from his trunk and we walked a little further into the clearing. Eventually, Billy stopped and threw the blanket on the ground. I took a seat on the material and he followed a moment later. He laid the bowl of snacks between us so that we could eat as we talked.

"What made you do this?" I asked curiously.

"What?" Billy asked.

Though I knew he wouldn't be comfortable with it, I wanted to know what was going on in his mind. "You're not the kind of guy to plan a romantic first date. What spurred this on?" I prompted.

Billy shook his head. "It's nothing, Rach."

Doubtful. If there was anything that Billy had done for us that was 'nothing,' it wasn't this. "Okay," I said blankly. I smiled at Billy and leaned forward to press a small kiss against his mouth. "Well, even though it was 'nothing,' I appreciate it."

Billy nodded. "Sure thing." I leaned back on the blanket as I started shivering slightly. I hadn't gotten used to the icy air in Indiana yet. Thankfully, Billy noticed my small movement. "Are you cold?" he asked.

"A little bit. I'm still getting used to the cold weather here," I admitted.

"Here." I watched as Billy slipped off his leather jacket and smiled as he slipped it over my shoulders to rest there. "Better?"

Even though the weather was still chilly, my cheeks warmed up at the sweet gesture. "Much. Thank you," I told him. I glanced at Billy out of the corner of my eyes and quickly noticed that the cut on his cheek was much smaller today. I took his chin gently in my hands. "Your cheek is looking better."

"All thanks to you," Billy replied. "You may want to consider becoming a nurse."

"Yeah, right. I would not have good bedside manner," I said, chuckling at the thought of me being a nurse.

Billy shook his head. "I doubt that."

"You don't count," I shot back. I leaned forward toward the basket; it looked like Billy had almost filled it to the brim. "Alright, I'm going through this."

"Go for it," Billy urged.

We smiled at each other as I dove into the basket. There were cookies and brownies and something even more surprising resting at the bottom of the basket. "What?" I gasped, pulling the container out. "You found key lime pie? No one sells it up here!"

A small grin turned upward on the edges of Billy's lips. He looked amused by the excitement in my voice. "You mentioned that you missed it and Susan was telling us at dinner the other day that they sell it at this bakery across town," Billy answered. I smiled at the sweet gesture that he had made. He didn't have to go across town to pick up the pie, but he had just because I had wanted it. "She wanted to get one but my dad thinks it's disgusting."

"It shows that your dad has poor taste in many things," I said.

Billy grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. We smiled at each other again as I cleared my throat. I could tell by the look on Billy's face that he wasn't comfortable with this conversation. "Hand me a slice of the pie, will you?"

Billy nodded. "Sure."

We watched each other with a small smile as Billy cut out a piece of the pie for me. He handed it over and for a moment, I thought about eating it but I ultimately decided to mess with him. I took my finger and swiped a bit of the whipped cream, licking it off. As expected, Billy's eyes darkened as he watched me. I knew that he was going to kiss me and that was why I took another swipe and instead of licking it off, I swiped it onto Billy's nose. He backed away from me and laughed.

Billy nodded as he wiped away the whipped cream from his face. "Alright. If that's how you want to play things..."

The tone of his voice should have been enough to tell me what was going to happen next. I watched as Billy took a large swipe of cream from the pie and smashed it into my face. I laughed hysterically, falling to the ground as Billy lept onto me. "Stop!" I shrieked, trying to writhe away from him.

"You started it!" Billy shot back.

We both laughed hysterically as Billy wiped whipped cream across my face. I laughed like an idiot as I attempted to press back against his chest to get away from him. It wasn't working. Billy didn't let up from his assault on me until he had completely wiped off all the whipped cream onto my face. I laughed happily as I leaned onto my knees and kissed Billy, spreading the whipped cream across his face. We smiled into the kiss as I took a scoop of the pie with my finger, broke our kiss, and popped the pie into my mouth.

A stupid giggle escaped my mouth as we smiled at each other and Billy leaned forward to press another kiss against my mouth. We shifted around for a moment until I had propped myself in front of Billy, who sat with his legs crossed as he pulled me into him. I smiled as he handed me a napkin to wipe myself off. He turned around and began rifling through his bag, pulling out a brownie and splitting it in half, giving me the larger piece. I smiled excitedly as he placed the additional desserts on the napkins in front of us.

Billy linked our fingers together as I shifted on the blanket again and turned to throw my legs over his lap. His leather jacket was resting against my shoulders, shielding me from the icy wind. I smiled at him as we shared the small brownie. This was one of the simplest dates that I had ever been on - a moonlit picnic - but it was one that I knew I would cherish forever. This wasn't a date that he would have planned for anyone. Tonight was showing me that Billy did know how to be romantic.

We sat in silence for a few moments as we ate and I looked around. The clearing was lovely but not easily spotted from the main road if you didn't know where you were going. "This place is beautiful. How'd you find it?" I asked curiously.

"When we first got to Hawkins I knew that I had to find a place to go whenever I got into it with my dad," Billy admitted honestly. My chest constricted with the thought that Billy had already known the moment he had arrived in town that his father would eventually hurt him. "I found this clearing when I was driving around with Max one afternoon."

"How often have you been here?" I asked hesitatingly.

"A few times," Bill answered vaguely. My stomach churned at the careless comment. How bad had things been? Had they always been as bad as they had been the other night? "That was the worst fight we've had since moving."

At least that made it seem like things normally weren't that bad. "Has it always been like that?" I asked.

Billy nodded. "Yeah. He's been a dick since I was a little kid but it got worse when my mom left."

It was surprising that Billy was so willing to talk about the darkest part of his life. I didn't imagine that he had told anyone about his mother leaving before. It was the kind of thing most people wouldn't even talk to spouses about. I wasn't sure why Billy was willing to discuss his familial issues with me, but I was glad that he was talking to someone about it. Still, I didn't want him to feel like I was pressuring him into telling me something he wasn't ready to discuss.

So, I laid a hand on his knee to stop him before he said something he didn't want to say. "You don't have to tell me this if you don't want to," I said earnestly.

"Do you mind?" Billy asked.

"Not at all," I said, smiling gently.

If anything came from tonight, I wanted it to be that Billy knew he could trust me with anything. "My mom was the best," Billy said softly. I smiled, glad to know that he had had at least one supportive parent. "My dad was awful to her - hit her and screamed at her all the time - but she would never let him hurt me. She always stepped in whenever he would come after me and he'd just turn it around on her. She tried to keep me out of the house as much as possible to avoid him, so she'd take us to the beach and we'd spend hours out there."

"Teaching you to surf?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah. Only took one trip for me to fall in love with it. She bought

me a board to learn on and would take me at least once a week. She would stand on the shore and watch while I surfed. Us being out all the time didn't sit well with my dad though and he got even worse," Billy said, pulling up his sleeve to show me a long but thin scar on his arm. I had to fight to not lay my hand on it. "I tried to pull my dad off her one night but he threw me off; I hit the counter and cut my arm open."

My eyes remained on his scar for a long time. I could see where the edge of the countertop had sliced Billy's arm. It looked like the cut had been deep which made my heart race. If he hadn't been careful - if the cut had been a little bit deeper and his father had refused to take him to the hospital - there was a good chance that he could have bled out. Billy rolled his sleeve back down to keep me from seeing the scar any longer. I wondered if he regretted saying anything, but he kept talking.

"They were throwing shit and hitting each other. When it was finally over he wouldn't let me go to the hospital and my mom was too afraid to sneak out with me. She patched me up and I went to sleep. She was gone the next morning," Billy admitted. I reached out and took Billy's hand, my heart breaking for his hard childhood. "I called her every day for weeks. She kept saying that she just had to take some time away and couldn't come back yet. I begged and pleaded for her to come back but she never did."

"Eventually she just stopped answering my calls and vanished. I don't even know where she is anymore. I mean, it was seven years ago," Billy continued. My eyes became misty even though Billy's remained hard. I supposed that it had just been so long since Billy had lost his mother that he had gotten over it. Of course, no one ever got over being left by a parent. "My dad got even worse once she was gone. He only had one target left to take his shit out on. About a year later he met Susan and married her and Max came too."

We remained silent for a few moments until I figured out what I wanted to say to him. "You didn't deserve that. Any of it. Neil doesn't deserve to have you for a son. He doesn't deserve to have any children," I told him honestly.

Billy shrugged off my concern. "It doesn't matter. It's over."

"It does matter," I insisted, placing my hand on his knee. "It matters that you know that you didn't do anything. Parents have one very simple job - love and care for their children. Yours didn't do that and mine didn't either."

Billy didn't smile but I could tell that he appreciated my reassurance. "We're a fucked up pair, huh?"

I laughed at his careless nature. "We complement each other well," I told him. "Thanks for telling me about your childhood. I know it couldn't have been easy."

Billy shrugged again. "I'm not sure where it came from. I've never told anyone about that."

It was a polite way of telling me that he wasn't completely comfortable with opening up to me as much as he had. "I'm glad you told me. Know that you can keep telling me anything," I said honestly. Billy grabbed my chin between his thumb and forefinger and pressed a small kiss against my mouth. "Well, since you've been so honest with me, maybe it's my turn."

"Only if you want to," Billy insisted.

It felt like I was going to explode if I didn't tell someone about what I had recently learned about myself. I had to talk to someone who wasn't my parents about this. "It turns out that I'm Russian," I spat out.

Billy's eyebrows knitted in confusion. "What do you mean?" he asked.

That probably wasn't the best way to bring up the revelation that had been bothering me so much the last twenty-four hours. "I had a long conversation with my parents yesterday about where I came from and they admitted some things about me that I never knew before," I explained vaguely.

"Like what?" Billy asked.

"I always thought that my birth parents gave me up after a few weeks and then I spent the next two years in an orphanage," I said as tonelessly as I possibly could. "According to my parents, I was left on

the doorstep of the orphanage."

Billy still looked shocked. "You were just left there?"

"That's not that uncommon," I said, reassuring the idea that plenty of kids were abandoned on the doorstep of an orphanage. The way that I had been abandoned wasn't a story exclusive to me. "Most people giving up their babies don't want to have to address why they're doing it."

Billy huffed under his breath. "Why bother having a kid?"

"I've asked myself that question a lot. I'm sure you've asked it too," I said gently, hoping that I wouldn't upset him. Billy didn't respond but judging by the look on his face, I knew that I was correct. "I should have known that I was Russian."

"Why's that?" Billy asked curiously.

"I can speak it," I admitted bluntly.

Billy's eyebrows shot up. "You can?" he asked.

My lips turned up in a vague smile. I'd never admitted to someone that I could speak Russian. "Da," I said, switching to my native tongue. "Ne znayu, gde ya eto uzna, no ya vseгда mog govorit' na nem."

It was extremely difficult to not laugh at the look on Billy's face. I figured he had thought I meant I knew a few phrases, not that I was a fluent speaker. Billy's eyebrows shot up in surprise at my perfect Russian. He nodded vaguely as he stared at me. "I'm not going to lie, that's kind of hot," Billy admitted, making me laugh. "What did you say?"

"I'm not sure where I learned how to speak Russian. I've been able to speak it for as long as I can remember," I explained, giving Billy the barebone explanation of how I had learned to speak Russian. "I suppose it was my first language. The person who left me at the orphanage doorstep left a note that was pinned to my blanket. My parents didn't tell me about it until last night."

Billy raised a curious eyebrow. "What does it say?"

How would he believe it? I hardly believed it. "It's mostly nonsense. It was written by a man named Vladislav. At least, that's the name he used in the letter. He mentions that I wouldn't be able to remember anything he wrote about by the time I got the letter. I guess he was right about that," I said, unable to remember the man who had saved my life. "He begged me to understand that he took me to try and save my life and give me a real future. Apparently whatever happened to me where I was born altered the course of my life forever.

"According to Vladislav, I was born to parents who were the designers of and participants in Project МКУльтра, which was a covert Russian government operation to develop mind-control techniques which could be used against enemies. The subjects, many of who were unwitting, suffered extensive use of psychedelic drugs, physical and mental abuse, sleep deprivation, and malnourishment, among many other experiments. He was trying to free those patients for years.

"I was the first person who Vladislav was able to free. He mentioned that I was the first in a line of children born to those participants and designers. He said that they would stop at nothing to make me one of them, whatever that meant. All he said was that if he hadn't taken me when he had, I would have been subjected to torture in its cruelest form until I was what they wanted. I don't know what he meant - he just said that I had been through enough in my time there and that he couldn't let me become a machine.

"The United States was the only place Vladislav thought I would be safe. He warned me to be careful and that he feared the people from the place I was born would find me again. He just ended the letter saying that he hoped he would see me again one day," I finished my explanation slightly awkwardly.

We sat in silence for a long time. I could tell that Billy was trying to figure out how he was supposed to react to what I had just told him. It wasn't something easy to swallow. The girl you liked telling you that she was Russian and part of a secret government operation raising superhumans. He seemed to be having a hard enough time with things now. I wondered how he would feel if I told him that

they had been at least moderately successful.

We remained in the tense silence for a few minutes before Billy started laughing. "And I thought my life was fucked," Billy said carelessly. I laughed, feeling just a little bit better as I whacked Billy over the back of the shoulder. "Do you believe it?"

It took me a few moments to figure out how to express the way I felt about the place I had been born. "I believe the place I was born was dangerous and that I'm better off being far away from it," I explained vaguely. It was impossible to know if Vladislav had been telling me the truth. "I don't know what I believe about it; I can't remember anything from that early."

"Then I'm glad he got you out," Billy said sweetly. I smiled at him as he started chuckling. I knew that he was trying to avoid being too in touch with his feelings for too long. "We make quite the pair."

"We certainly do. Billy and Yelena," I joked, accentuating the Russian accent on my name.

"Yelena?" Billy asked curiously.

"Supposedly it's my given name," I told him.

Billy thought about it for a moment before shaking his head. "I like Rach much better."

Hearing Billy refer to me by my nickname was enough to bring a smile to my face. This was where I belonged. "So do I." We smiled at each other as I breathed out deeply. It had been a long time since I'd been on a date that had gone this well. I'd never been on a date where I enjoyed the person I was with so much. "I can't remember the last time that I went on a date and talked about something important."

A small grin turned up on the edges of Billy's lips. "I can't remember ever going on a date," he admitted.

My eyebrows shot up. "Never?"

"Never."

How was he telling me the truth? I had seen Billy go out with a couple of girls since we had met. "There's no way that's true. You're hot and an asshole," I pointed out, making him smirk proudly. "You're catnip for women. Come on, you can tell me. When's the last time you took a girl out on an actual date?"

Even though I was telling the truth, Billy was adamant that he had never gone on a date. "I don't take girls out, Rach. I take them home."

At least he wasn't trying to lie to me about the kind of person he was. "I'm not sure whether I should be impressed or offended," I said honestly. Billy chuckled. "Why didn't you take me home?"

"You're better than that," Billy said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

I leaned forward to press a kiss against his mouth. "You're regretting not bringing me home, aren't you?" I joked, my lips brushing against his.

Billy laughed. "Rach, I've never wanted someone so badly in my life."

"Having to chase a girl is probably good for your ego," I said.

It wouldn't be too bad for Billy to have to chase me for a little while. I just didn't know how patient I could be. "You know what else is good for my ego?" Billy asked. I shook my head. "Knowing that you started a fight for my heart."

Damn him. I wished that I hadn't said anything. I laughed at his confidence, shoving his face to the side. "As I said, Hargrove, I didn't start the fight. I ended it," I said proudly.

"What happened?" Billy asked curiously.

"Tina asked me where you were yesterday and didn't take kindly to me telling her that you two had only fucked and now you weren't interested," I explained.

A few seconds after I had stopped speaking, Billy burst into a fit of laughter. Once he had calmed down, he was still shaking his head. "We should've met years ago so that you could have been the one to

end my hookups when I got sick of them."

As much as I liked being around Billy, he was the biggest pain in the ass that I had ever met. I laughed again, knocking Billy onto his back in the grass. "I think not," I snapped. A moment later, I leaned down so that I could press my mouth against Billy's ear. "If we had known each other years ago, you wouldn't have needed to hook up with them."

It was the truth. With how much I liked Billy, there was no way that I would let go of him once I had him. Billy's fingers tightened around the strap of my tank top as he pulled my body flush against his. I sucked in a deep breath. "Maybe that's true. You should know now that you'll never want to hook up with anyone else," Billy said confidently.

That was true. "What are you doing tomorrow?" I asked.

"What's the offer?" Billy replied.

One that I knew he couldn't refuse. "My parents are heading into Indianapolis for the day to watch *Death of a Salesman*. It's a late show so they'll be gone all night. It's a big house with no one around to keep me company," I teased.

Billy's blue eyes darkened as a wicked grin appeared on his lips. "We can't leave a beautiful woman alone with no protection."

"Of course not. That wouldn't be the gentlemanly thing to do."

Billy grinned. "They'll be gone all night, huh?"

"All night," I confirmed, wrapping my fingers around Billy's belt to tug at him. "Better get some rest tonight, Hargrove. You'll need it for tomorrow."

Another prideful grin appeared on the edges of Billy's lips as he watched my hands hover over his waist. I felt my blood pounding through my veins as Billy lifted himself to kiss me roughly, throwing me off of his waist and into the grass. One of his hands dug almost painfully into my ass and the skin on my thigh as he hiked my skirt up. His other hand wound up into my hair as he began tearing at the

strands. I started breathing heavily as I pulled his tucked-in shirt from its hold in the waistband of his jeans.

A second barely passed before Billy wrapped his hands around my thighs and he rolled me over his body, shoving me back into the grass again. I grunted in surprise as I felt his fingertips digging somewhat painfully into my back, his nails breaking the skin there. I pulled Billy's shirt open and threw it off his frame. Billy shoved the jacket that I had borrowed from him earlier off of my shoulders as his fingers traveled down my body. I could feel his fingers worming their way toward my waist again.

Billy was likely going to end up leaving bruises littered around the lower half of my neck and chest from the way he was kissing me there, but I didn't have half a mind to stop him. My short skirt was hiked up around my waist as Billy hooked his fingers into my waistband, tugging the material down around my legs. I backed away from Billy just long enough to kick them off of my feet and away from us, where it was likely going to get lost in the bushes.

The following ten minutes (that wound up feeling much more like an hour) were filled with things that I had done before, but this time felt different. The rings that Billy was wearing on his fingers were cold compared to how overheated my skin had become. The stubble of his short mustache rubbed against my skin, causing goosebumps to erupt. Billy's voice had grown into more of a growl than anything else. His teeth were bruising me from the pressure against my skin, but I made sure to make it very obvious that I didn't mind.

Strands of my hair had been torn out from our rough movements. Billy's handprints were littered over my thighs and stomach. My throat was sore from groaning loudly. The only way that I was getting breaths was by gasping for air. My spine was strained from how far I had been bending my back. My heart felt like it was threatening to explode in my chest. When Billy had brought me as far as I could go, he let up on me without warning. I pulled my head up from the grass to stare at him blankly.

"What are you -?"

"We have to get you home," Billy interrupted, sending me a shit-

eating grin. "Bonus points for eleven forty-five, remember?"

My jaw just about dropped at his words. I couldn't believe now was the time Billy decided to follow the rules. Our heavy breathing was echoing through the woods as I stared sidelong at him and started chuckling mirthfully. "Who would have thought that Billy Hargrove would be the kind of guy to care about a curfew?"

"I'm not that kind of guy, Rach," Billy teased.

"Yes, you are," I said breathlessly. My voice was shaking along with my pounding heart as we stared at each other. Both of our faces broke into smiles a moment later. "I'm expecting you to finish that tomorrow, by the way."

Billy smirked. "Oh, I intend to do much more than finish it."

We smiled at each other again as Billy clambered back to his feet. His shirt and jacket had been discarded in the grass. I looked around for my underwear but quickly realized that I wasn't going to find them. Instead, I settled on shifting my shirt and skirt back into place and pulled my shoes back on my feet. Billy grinned at my general discomfort and discombobulation as I tried to find my clothes and slow my heart rate back to normal. I knew that Billy had been planning on doing this to me all night.

Even as the minutes passed and I checked my makeup to ensure that I hadn't wiped it all off and that my hair didn't look like it was mussed from any type of sex, Billy watched me carefully. I occasionally felt Billy's hands run across my lower back or his lips brush against my jugular vein as he walked around, picking up the mess that we had left behind. As we finally walked back to the car, I felt Billy's hands run from my outer thigh to rest against my ass.

We walked back to the car together and I smiled as Billy opened the door for me. He wasn't a gentleman but he did care about me and care about what I thought of him. I leaned up to press a kiss against his cheek as I clambered into the car and he shut the door behind me. Once I was settled in my seat, I let out a breath that I was certain I had been holding since we'd stopped fooling around. Billy hopped into the driver's seat after a moment and started the engine.

Though the car engine was rumbling impatiently beneath us, Billy made no indication that he was going to start driving. Instead, he looked at me and grinned playfully. "You okay?" he asked.

"Great," I said numbly, not trusting myself to say much more as my heart was still pounding. "You're still coming over tomorrow, right?"

Billy grinned at me. "All over."

I had to look away from how badly I was blushing. "Good. Who would have known that Billy Hargrove is the type to please a woman first?"

"It's always ladies first, Rach. I know that."

"Hargrove, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful... friendship," I said, trailing off as I realized I was unsure of what we were.

Billy shook his head. "I could never be friends with you."

His words didn't make any sense to me at first. I had thought that we were friends. I glanced at Billy as he turned to me and smiled. That was when I understood what he had meant. He meant that he could never be just friends with me. I felt the same way about him. I placed my hands over his on the gear shift to stop him from leaving the clearing. Billy's hands left the steering wheel like it had burned him as they went immediately to my waist and back to help me hop into his lips. Our lips met in a heated kiss.

Billy pushed me back so that my tailbone was pressing against the steering wheel. We both laughed as the horn blared under my weight. Billy ran his hands to my hair and slid them back down to hold me around my butt, pulling my body against his. I could feel just how excited he was for tomorrow. I slid my hands down to the button on his jeans and undid it. I had just managed to slide my hands underneath his waistband when a knock sounded at the window.

We jumped apart and snapped our heads to attention to see Hopper standing just outside the car with his arms folded and an annoyed look on his face. We both smiled at him. "You two can't ever go see a movie?" Hopper growled.

"Hi, Hop. We were just on our way home," I lied.

Hopper looked like he would have believed that the sky was pink before he believed me that we were heading him. "Yeah, it looked that way," Hopper snapped. The older sheriff was constantly telling me off for doing something inappropriate. Hopper looked away from me and scowled at Billy. "Take her home, Hargrove."

"Yes, officer," Billy said, rolling up the window as he cranked the engine and took off down the road.

"Something to look forward to," I teased quietly.

Billy chuckled. "You're not going to be able to walk when I'm done with you."

If there was ever something I wanted to be the truth, that was it. I laid my hand over the bulge that had grown in Billy's jeans. "What makes you think you'll be able to?" I asked him.

Billy looked away from the road long enough to meet my eyes. "What time are your parents leaving?"

"Eleven," I answered.

"I'll be there at eleven-oh-one."

A small smile pulled at my lips. I leaned over the center console so that I could press another kiss against Billy's mouth. "I look forward to it." I shifted back in my seat as we broke out of the woods and back onto the main road. "I'm glad you showed me this spot," I said after a few beats of silence.

"I'm glad you liked it."

"How will you ever top this date?"

Billy glanced at me for a moment and huffed. "What makes you think you're getting a second date?"

Why did he always have to ruin a good thing? I laughed, whacking him over the shoulder. "You know that you can't resist me. After all,

you'll be there at eleven-oh-one, right?" I teased.

Billy smirked. "On the dot."

We settled back in the car seats for a while and watched the road as we headed back to my house. "This was nice, Billy," I said, breaking the silence. "I'm glad you asked me to come out."

"After last night you didn't give me much of a choice," Billy half-joked.

If he wanted to take me out, I wanted it to be because he liked me, not because he wanted to make up what had happened last night. I also wanted to make sure he knew I didn't mind what had happened last night. I sent Billy a sad smile. "You don't owe me anything for last night. I would have been happy to do it, no matter what had happened in the morning," I told him honestly.

"Why?" Billy asked curiously.

It was sad to know that he had never had someone care about him unconditionally. "Do you need me to say it?" I asked. "I care about you, Billy. I don't want to see you in trouble or getting hurt."

Billy briefly glanced over at me as we pulled up to a stoplight. He hit the brakes without looking away from me as we jolted forward in our seats. The red light still glowing on us, Billy leaned across the seats and pressed a long kiss against my mouth. He held my chin tightly and refused to release me, even as I saw the green light filtering through my closed eyes. We kissed for such a long time that I saw the lights change another four times before we finally broke the kiss.

We smiled at each other as I began to blush from his piercing stare. "Greenlight, Hargrove," I said bashfully.

"You're that eager to get away from me, huh?" Billy teased.

"I'm eager to get away from you before we start something that we don't have enough time to finish tonight," I admitted.

A wicked grin appeared on Billy's lips. "We'll never have enough time." I smiled at him as he took my hand and pressed a kiss against

the back of it, releasing me as we pulled into my driveway. Billy glanced at the dashboard clock. "Eleven forty-five. Would you look at that?"

"Right on time. Thanks for the ride and tonight."

"I'll walk you up."

"Okay."

We both smiled at each other again as Billy pulled up next to my car, shut off the engine, and opened his door. I was halfway out of my seat when Billy opened my door the rest of the way and offered me his hand. I smiled at him as I took his hand and linked our fingers together. Billy closed the door behind me and we walked up together to my front door stoop. We turned to stare at each other as I blushed. I wasn't sure what to do when we turned to face each other, standing in front of the door to my house.

Before either one of us could make the first move, the front door opened, startling me but making my goodbye with Billy that much easier. "We've won our bonus points," Mom teased, standing just behind the threshold.

All three of us chuckled. "I had a good time," Billy told me politely.

"Yeah, I did too," I said. "I'll see you soon?"

Billy nodded. "Absolutely." I was extremely pleased that Billy settled with a kiss on the cheek to say goodbye in front of my parents. "Goodnight, Rach," Billy said.

"Night, Billy. Thanks for this, I had fun," I told him.

Billy's eyes glittered teasingly. "Oh, me too."

"Goodnight, Billy," Mom said, drawing his attention to her. "Thank you for getting her home safe."

"It's my pleasure. You both have a wonderful night," Billy said as Dad appeared in the doorway.

Dad nodded, smiling at Billy. "You too, Billy. Drive safe!"

Our quarter all waved at each other happily. As Billy walked back to his Camaro, I smiled at him. Our evening might not have been the most traditional date in the world, but I was glad that we had finally gone out. Even though we teased each other and our relationship leaned heavily into the physical, we were coming to care very deeply about one another. That part of our relationship could grow with time, after all. Billy had even proven that he was a gentleman for most of the evening too.

Naturally, right as I had thought that I saw my forgotten thong hanging out of Billy's back pocket. I slammed the door shut before my parents could see it. "What was that about?" Mom asked, startled by my sudden reaction.

I almost swore that I could hear Billy laughing through the door. "It's just the wind," I explained weakly.

"Okay," Mom said doubtfully, throwing the deadbolt on the door. "Well, now that he's gone, it was a good date?"

"It was a really good date. It was probably one of the best ones I've ever been on," I told her honestly.

"You look happy," Dad commented.

"I am," I said.

My parents exchanged a pleased smile. They had wanted me to be this happy since the move. "We're glad to hear it. Billy's a nice young man," Mom said.

No, he's not. "Yeah, he is," I lied.

"You should get some rest. It's been a long week," Dad said.

"Yeah, I will. I'll see you guys before you go?" I asked.

"Of course. Goodnight, love," Mom said.

"Night, darling," Dad said.

"Goodnight, guys."

My parents and I exchanged hugs and kisses as I turned and headed back upstairs, holding my skirt tight to my frame. I walked into my room and closed my door behind me. I glanced toward my window and threw the curtains open. Billy was still in the car, currently hanging out of his car window. He had my thong dangling from between his fingers. I scowled at the smirk on his face but a smile appeared on mine quickly. I slid my window and leaned over the edge.

"You're an asshole," I hissed at him.

"You like me anyway," Billy countered.

"Unfortunately, that much is true," I chuckled.

We grinned at each other as Billy tossed my thong somewhere in his backseat. "I'll call you before I leave tomorrow," Billy called up.

"Goodnight, Billy."

"Night, Rach."

The stirring in my gut reminded me that I was nervous about what was going to happen. I felt the butterflies in my stomach and knew that my relationship with Billy was leading me toward trouble, but I couldn't help it. I liked spending time with him and liked the feeling that I had when we were together. I watched Billy roll up his window and back the Camaro out of my driveway. I watched him drive off for a moment and lingered at the window, knowing that our relationship wasn't good but too interested to walk away from it.